



There is no intermission  
during the concert.

## Friday, June 10, 2022 | 8:00am

Zalk Theater, Besant Hill School

### OJAI Dawns: Lewis + Mitchell

Emi Ferguson *flute* | Gleb Kanasevich *clarinet* | Clay Zeller-Townson *bassoon* | Jonny Allen *percussion*  
Matthew Aucoin *piano* | Miranda Cuckson *violin* | Carrie Frey *viola* | Doug Balliett *double bass*

George E. LEWIS

#### ***Artificial Life 2007, Part 1***

Emi Ferguson *flute* | Gleb Kanasevich *clarinet* | Clay Zeller-Townson *bassoon*  
Jonny Allen *percussion* | Matthew Aucoin *piano* | Miranda Cuckson *violin*  
Carrie Frey *viola* | Doug Balliett *double bass*

Roscoe MITCHELL

#### ***Cards from At 440 Oakwood Drive***

Emi Ferguson *flute* | Clay Zeller-Townson *bassoon*  
Elliot Figg *harpsichord* | Doug Balliet *double bass*

*This work is currently under development through Metropolis Ensemble and is a co-commission with Metropolis Ensemble, Ruckus, and the Immanuel Wilkins Quartet.*

George E. LEWIS

#### ***Artificial Life 2007, Part 2***

Emi Ferguson *flute* | Gleb Kanasevich *clarinet* | Clay Zeller-Townson *bassoon*  
Jonny Allen *percussion* | Matthew Aucoin *piano* | Miranda Cuckson *violin*  
Carrie Frey *viola* | Doug Balliett *double bass*

ZALK THEATER,  
BESANT HILL SCHOOL  
8585 OJAI SANTA PAULA ROAD

**George E. LEWIS** (b. 1952)  
*Artificial Life 2007* (2007)

**Roscoe MITCHELL** (b. 1944)  
*Cards from At 440 Oakwood Drive* (2021)

After AMOC\*'s commission of George Lewis's new opera *The Comet* was announced, AMOC\* violinist Keir GoGwilt suggested we should read Lewis's book *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, chronicling the history of the AACM (Association for Advancement of Creative Musicians) as a way to become familiar with the rich legacy from which Lewis sprung. I became deeply absorbed in the music of AACM members, and was wonderfully surprised to hear Roscoe Mitchell, a founding member of the AACM, composer, and multi-instrumentalist, extensively using Baroque instruments, particularly Baroque flutes and recorders, in many of his works. Needless to say, I was incredibly excited by this and reached out to Roscoe Mitchell to express my admiration, our mutual passion for woodwinds old and new, and my hope to work with him. While this all seemed like a dream in the midst of 2020, fast forward a few months and the members of AMOC\* are deep in workshop of Lewis's music with him over Zoom, with *Artificial Life* as our entry point. At the same time Mitchell is beginning to work on a new concert piece for Ruckus, the Immanuel Wilkins Quartet, and me, combining Baroque, modern classical, and jazz performers under the umbrella of the Metropolis Ensemble, which commissioned the work. It was a beautiful reminder of how life is often circular and reflexive: While Mitchell's work inspired the next generation of AACM members, including Lewis, this new work of Mitchell's came about because of our exploration into Lewis's writing. Both Mitchell and Lewis have an incredible way of inviting the performers into the creative process through instructive improvisation that gives the performers agency within the context of their specific compositional and creative languages. Lewis's foreword to the score notes that "*Artificial Life* is a situational-form musical composition designed for ensembles of between eight and thirty (or more) players."

The work presents a model of group improvisation as an emergent phenomenon arising from negotiation and local intelligence with sounds and silences produced according to the improvisers' intuition and considered judgment. The piece is open to performers from any musical tradition, including those that do not regularly include improvisation modes of performance, with the instructions serving as a kind of go-to toolbox for producing a range of sounds and forms that will far exceed what the composer would imagine, and for that reason, there is no canonically correct way for the piece to sound. Because of this, no two performances of the piece are the same. Mitchell's work, similarly, is also clearly structured but allows the performers choices and freedom. *Cards from At 440 Oakwood Drive* is an excerpt from the larger three-movement work. Given the complexities of getting all nine performers involved together for performances, Mitchell ingeniously created a way for all, groups of, or solo performers to perform independently by creating a set of "cards" for each player that can be performed in any grouping of instruments. The cards invite the performers into Mitchell's language through unmeasured melodic and harmonic material that may be reorganized, "shuffled," by the performers, leaving the creation of the musical structure to the performers. The full work is still under development to be premiered in late 2023.

—EMI FERGUSON

## Improved Improvisation

In *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*, George E. Lewis writes that "histories of post-1960 African American experimental music, which developed in the midst of one of the most turbulent and unstable periods in U.S. history ... tend to confound standard narratives." Based on whiteness, those standard narratives help account for the erasure of "African American artists and

cultural tropes" from the discourse around modern experimental and avant-garde developments. A striking example of such erasure is the long neglect, until recently, of the legacy of Julius Eastman, who is one of the focal points of AMOC\*'s Ojai program.

Lewis, a composer, performer, scholar, teacher, and now artistic director of the

International Contemporary Ensemble, wrote his pathbreaking history of the AACM — the Chicago-based Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians — as an insider. He himself joined the organization while still in his teens, in 1971. Lewis's multifaceted investigation of its achievements

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## IMPROVED IMPROVISATION

and ongoing influence even inspired *Afterword*, an experimental opera that was featured at the 2017 Ojai Festival as part of the program curated by Music Director Vijay Iyer. Lewis has described *Afterword* as a “*Bildungsoper* [a “coming-of age” opera] about Black experimentalists trying to revise and revitalize their practices in the face of resistance [that] also aligns with what is being discussed today as the decolonization of art music.” He is currently working on an opera commissioned by AMOC\*, which is based on W.E.B. Du Bois’s Afrofuturist allegory *The Comet*.

*Artificial Life 2007*, which dates from the year in which Lewis published *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, exemplifies the long-standing interest in the possibilities and implications of improvisation. Instead of a “centralized score” of conventional notation, Lewis provides two pages of instructions — corresponding to Parts 1 and 2, respectively — for each instrumental group (plus “any instrument not envisioned” in his categories). Part 1 presents a grid of 16 “tasks” to be performed sequentially. Part 2 gives instructions for “creating responses” to the ensemble or “creating independent material.”

The “quasi-algorithmic procedures” prescribed to execute *AL2007* result

in what Lewis terms “a situational-form musical composition” of group improvisation. This is not “chance music,” nor is it an exercise in free-for-all, open-ended spontaneity. The protocols Lewis provides require meticulous attention to the situation unique to each performance context; at the same time, they allow the performers “the freedom to create what they want to hear from a combination of the tools provided and their own creative and cultural standpoints.”

Another ingenious negotiation of the dialectic between formal structure and freedom informs the new large-scale work by Roscoe Mitchell, from which we hear an excerpt between the two parts of *AL2007*. One of AACM’s co-founders and a vastly influential figure as a composer, performer, and teacher, Mitchell is creating a three-movement work of about 40 minutes for nine musicians that fuses Mitchell’s experimentation with jazz and early music instruments. The musicians include Emi Ferguson (playing on both Baroque and modern flutes) with Ruckus and the Immanuel Wilkins Quartet under the auspices of the Metropolis Ensemble. The first part is to be played by Ruckus with Baroque instruments at A415 pitch, the second by the Immanuel Wilkins Quartet, and the third by both ensembles together — this is the section titled *At 440 Oakwood Drive*.

In the 1970s, to solve some of the issues Mitchell noticed coming up with ensemble improvisation, he devised a system he calls “cards” — music scored in notated form on separate cards that are distributed to the musicians to arrange *ad libitum*. Ferguson describes the cards as a process of “guided improvisation” that allows Mitchell “to make sure that the language the performers are using is his, while the way they structure the performance is theirs.” The performers do not choose what notes to play. But they do get to choose in what order to play their cards, as well as tempo, intensity, and how to interact with the other player(s). “Each time you do it could be different,” says Ferguson. “Or you could take the same path each time.”

Negotiating between this discipline and freedom generates much of the fascination of the works by Mitchell and Lewis. Beyond the realm of musical creativity, the framework of these improvisatory experiments poses philosophical and sociological questions as well. As Lewis notes regarding *AL2007*, “the success of a given performance ... will be less a question of individual freedom than of the assumption of personal responsibility for the sonic environment.”

—THOMAS MAY

*This concert is approximately 45 minutes.*