JON GIBSON (b. 1940)

   Jon Gibson, winds, keyboards, autoharp, ambient recording; Joseph Kubera, keyboards; David Van Tieghem, percussion

   Jon Gibson, Joseph Kubera, keyboards

   Jon Gibson, soprano saxophones (overlaid)

   Jon Gibson, saxophone; Joseph Kubera, keyboards; David Van Tieghem, percussion

TT: 69:06

New World Records, 20 Jay Street, Suite 1001, Brooklyn, NY 11201
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GEORGE LEWIS (b. 1952)

   (flute, clarinet, violin, viola, cello, piano, percussion)

2. Hexis (2013) 13:00
   (flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano, percussion)

3. The Mangle of Practice (2014) 12:54
   (violin & piano)

   (flute, clarinet, saxophone, violin, viola, cello, harp, piano, percussion)

   Emma Hospelhorn, flutes; Katie Schoepflin, clarinets; Taimur Sullivan, saxophone; Tarn Travers, violin; Minghuan Xu, violin; Ammie Brod, viola; Chris Wild, cello; Ben Melsky, harp; Winston Choi, piano; Mabel Kwan, piano; John Corkill, percussion; Gregory Beyer, percussion; Michael Lewanski, conductor

TT: 54:28

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The four Lewis compositions on this album reference a wide range of ideas, from rhetoric in Ancient Rome to actor network theory, and the album’s eponymous composition finds its grounding in the concept of the “assemblage,” (or agencement in French) a pragmatic, material, non-teleological approach to composition, variously explored by philosophers like Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Manuel DeLanda. The works are given brilliant and crystalline interpretations by Chicago’s widely acclaimed Ensemble Dal Niente, an ensemble that, in its ten years of existence, has pioneered an exceptional range of genre-spanning collaborations.

Alongside his creative work, Lewis has advanced a scholarly critique of the ways in which musical genres have been coded by race. Advocating an inclusive and intersectional conception of modern experimentalism, he has repeatedly questioned the historically racialized distinction between composition and improvisation and, as a historian, addressed the exclusion of black creativity among the many traditional lineages of the avant-garde. The works featured on Assemblage, his second portrait album for New World Records, Lewis extends some of his longstanding interests in music and philosophy. These interests had already emerged in works like the Shawdougraph series of live compositions for “creative orchestra” (1975–77), which drew inspiration from Kierkegaard, and Phenomenology (1976), a recombinant solo trombone work that makes playful reference to his undergraduate studies of Husserl and music with Edward Casey and David Carr at Yale. In recent works, Lewis has returned to philosophical themes. Les Exercices Spirituels (2010), for eight instruments and computer sound spatialization, references the writings of Pierre Hadot and is dedicated to Lewis’s friend and teaching colleague Arnold I. Davidson; and Tractatus (2012), a large-scale work for the Glasgow Improvisors Orchestra, was inspired by Wittgenstein.1

1 See George Lewis, *The Shawdougraph Series: Compositions for Creative Orchestra*, with the NOW Orchestra (Spool, 2001); *The George Lewis Solo Trombone Record* (Sackville 5012); Lewis, *Les Exercices Spirituels* (Tzadik 8081); and “Making Tractatus: GIO Fest 2012,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSR9urLdRA.

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Among the album’s compositions, Mnemosis (2012) and Hexis (2013) foreground repetition, and feature hypnotic patterns with striking sonic surfaces. Mnemosis, originally written for and premiered by the Talea Ensemble and scored

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1 See George Lewis, *The Shadowgraph Series: Compositions for Creative Orchestra*, with the NOW Orchestra (Spool, 2001); *The George Lewis Solo Trombone Record* (Sackville 5012); Lewis, *Les Exercices Spirituels* (Tzadik 8081); and “Making Tractatus: GIO Fest 2012,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSR9urLdRA.


been defined by William Peterson as “the fixed tendency that results from repeated acts.”

Glyn P. Norton adds the following with respect to Quintilian’s use of the Greek term in the 1st century CE: “Just as kairos, in the Aristotelian tradition, defines how we respond ethically to contingent events, so hexis retains a similar ethical value by showing how what we do, rather than paste itself to a kind of tensile, modular ethics recalling Stoic firmitas, is conditioned largely by our behavioral suppleness.” In other words, hexis is not mere habit, but rather entails the responsive work of extemporaneous rhetoric; one needs to “break with routine.”

In Hexis, it is the listener’s experience that Lewis aims to press towards such an improvisation. At the outset, we are thrown into the middle of a process that does not seem to be addressing us. It is as if the surreal landscapes of Krzysztof Penderecki’s orchestral works of the 1960s were sampled and shrunk to the vocabulary of a hauntingly repetitive minimalism. Quietly and delicately repeating modules give the listener erratic impressions of loops and cycles that persistently overlap one another with slight variations. Three minutes in, the energy has exploded into a Nancarrow-like series of quasi-mechanical processes that last for about two minutes. Modules at different levels of intensity take turns in the texture, erupting as a series of jump cuts. Echoes of theater emerge, but in settings where it is not clear anything is being expressed. About eleven minutes in, one finds a particularly striking piccolo solo, a dance-like exclamation over the percussive sounds of a ramshackle band. There isn’t supposed to be narrative, but this felt like the end of a film. In these compositions, apparitions materialize and recede at an unruly pace.

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4 Mnemosis was premiered by the Talea Ensemble on December 14, 2012, at the Mannes College of Music. New York City.

5 Conversation between George Lewis and Michael Gallope, recorded on June 21, 2017.

6 Hexis was premiered by the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players on February 21, 2013, at the Herbst Theatre, San Francisco.

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5 

The confluence of overlapping repetitions asks the listener to engage extemporaneously with non-narrative flows of time, a principle that applies equally to Mnemosis. Lewis describes it with a few accessible points of comparison:

In Mnemosis and Hexis, I tend to think of time as being a bit like riding the bus, when you listen to these pieces or when you’re playing them. You’re looking at the scenery and the scenery is constantly changing. I look at them as like the weather. I’ve always wanted certain kinds of my music to be like the weather. If you think about the weather, we think of the weather as having form and also as extremely varied. It’s pretty much variations on a theme we experience throughout our entire lives.9

Riding the bus is akin to the experience of walking in a city, experiencing the weather, or reading a medieval chronicle that contains no overarching narrative. There is no strong sense of causality linking events A, B, and C. Events happen without a global law, idea, principle, concept, or human carrying the composition from beginning to end. In the context of such dense layers of non-narrative looping, other analogues might come to mind.10 I was reminded of the uneven repetitions, simultaneously creaturely and mechanical, suggested by Paul Klee’s Twisting Machine (1922). There is delicate counterpoint, but it is always a little bit off-kilter.

Still, we might wonder—is there still an overall result or impression? Lewis intriguingly describes the effect of the repetitions in Hexis and Mnemosis as a peculiar kind of eternity or stasis, made possible by the attention to the ephemeral passage of the “now.” That is, in his view, the summation of all these non-narrative sequences engenders a cyclical temporality that is the inverse of any kind of forward-moving development. It is redolent of Nietzsche’s famous image of the “eternal recurrence.”11 Lewis explains: “In the end, what you get is a kind of timelessness. That is the goal of Hexis and Mnemosis. You are encouraged to stay in one place and really be in the moment. I’m looking for a sense of stasis in these pieces.”12

It is a strange instance of the eternal in music. For Lewis, it is akin to proposition 6.4311 of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus: “If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then he lives eternally who lives in the present.”13 That is, these layered repetitions allow one to access an enigmatic sense of timelessness from nothing more than the sensory fabric of the here and now. Thus, instead of grasping a global form that has to be cognized in full, Lewis asks his listener to remain open, flexible, and accessible to the improvised paths of one’s own listening. Because the work is in the multiple paths of its flexible becoming. Jerrold Levinson explores an allied conception of musical time with his notion of “concatenation” or “momentary listening,” and Lewis has described himself as a “concatenationist.”14 Such an open listening strategy is further facilitated by Lewis’s skill as an orchestrator: The counterpoint among his instruments is consistently transparent, with plenty of nooks and crannies in which to burrow one’s attention. It also reflects his longstanding practice as an improviser and collaborator. As a performer in a group, one is thrown into an intricate drama of collaboration; one has to develop instincts for negotiating the momentary feel of real time.

9 **Conversation between George Lewis and Michael Gallope.**

10 On the historicity of repetition in black culture, see James Snead, “Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture,” in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, 99–80 (Routledge, 1984).


12 Conversation between George Lewis and Michael Gallope.


By comparison with *Hexis* and *Mnemosis, Assemblage* (2013), the final work on this disc, is more energetic, even chaotic. Written for a 9-piece version of Ensemble Dal Niente, Lewis describes *Assemblage* as having a feeling of pushing ahead all the time, "or turning a wheel."\(^8\) It can give the impression of an urban crowd bustling in every direction. Or a rising and falling activity of bouncing against the interior of a box that nonetheless manages to contain a certain sense of entropy. There are jump cuts between strange miniature scenes of music that feature short ostinato-like figures providing a local vibe for less than a minute (or often even less). Occasionally, echoes of the repetitions in *Hexis* and *Mnemosis* interrupt the flow, as when a quick two bars or three beats is repeated twice. But in *Assemblage*, repetition is the exception rather than the rule.

As alluded to above, *Assemblage* takes its name from Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *agencement*, which the philosophers use to describe a material being that is fundamentally the product of relation, exterior connection, change, and even corruption—not genesis, essence, purity or autonomy.\(^9\) In the form of an artwork, an assemblage is akin to a heap of readymade materials. One creates one by combining what is already there, in the manner of a *bricoleur*, without a strong governing design, but instead by way of practical and ready-to-hand affordances. Creating an assemblage entails asking: Does it work? How does it change? What can be added?

In writing *Assemblage*, Lewis drew inspiration from a pioneering generation of black visual artists—notably, Noah Purifoy, David Hammons, Betye Saar, and John Outterbridge. Purifoy built assemblages on a grand scale, erecting an entire environment in Southern California near Joshua Tree National Park, using a wide range of materials scavenged from urban dumps (broken televisions, old tires, glass shards). By contrast with Purifoy's work, however, most of what Lewis appropriates are not readymade materials—there is little in the way of musical detritus or quotation. Aside from a noisy yet cryptic homage to Roscoe Mitchell's soprano saxophone work at around 11'50", Lewis's *Assemblage* is largely built out of musical elements he fabricated himself, which are then subject to a freely pursued "recombinant process" he describes as "self-scavenging."\(^17\)

The result may be somewhat entropic in its overall style, but it is not freeform. On *Assemblage*'s musical surfaces, certain consistencies emerge, something like changing television channels, or jump cuts every 20-40 seconds or so. In his words: "Some people think of this way of composing as free form. Well—free of what? I don't think you're that free of anything. Teleologies, where they exist, are momentary and contingent. I try to spring them on you."\(^18\) For Lewis, one's experience of freedom is always subject to some kind of dialectical collision. Moreover, philosophically, for Lewis, concepts of freedom that focus on ego-driven accomplishment, emancipation, and autonomy become cause for skepticism and caution. In Lewis's view, neither music nor language is there to be a transparent vehicle for one's expressive desires; they are complex forms through which one can sense the equally complex social and cultural processes that surround, inhabit, and condition who we are. Here, the processes of composition, performance, and listening come to life as a tangled web of dialectical relations, obligations, and responses.

The unpredictable interplay between human and material agencies is an explicit theme of the piano and violin duo, *The Mangle of Practice* (2014), written...
for violinist Minghuan Xu and pianist Winston Choi, both of Ensemble Dal Niente. Taking its title from a 1984 article on actor network theory by Andrew Pickering (to whom the work is dedicated), The Mangle of Practice explores how practical relationships, decisions, and mediations structurally disfigure the elements in a given situation. Lewis states of this work: “Having gotten into repetition, I was trying to find a way to get out.” He continues: “I realized what I am doing there is writing out some of the repetitions [without repeat bars]. The repetitions are questions of recurrence . . . Particularly in those sections where Winston Choi is plucking those strings.” In such episodes of recurrence, The Mangle of Practice presents collisions with the materiality of the instruments; there are a wide variety of extended techniques—many of them extremely virtuosic—involving materials inside and outside the piano, alongside a full armada of shrieking glissandi, cosmic harmonics, bracing tremolos, and the use of dramatically variable bow pressure. Over the course of minutes, one hears episodes of internally consistent materials that are set in motion like windup toys, until a cut occurs, and a new sonic palette unfolds. It gives the impression of a single sonic object with over a dozen sides, being gradually flipped from one side to the next.

Finally, one might ask what Lewis’s music, taken as a whole, specifically allows one to feel and think about these grand philosophical questions—of time, repetition, assemblage, materiality, the interpenetration of the human and the technological, the reciprocal, co-constitutive relationships between the human and the inhuman. There is no blueprint for resistance to the injustices of neoliberal capitalism, the reification of academic canons, the persistence of racial bias, invisibility, and exclusion. To ears attuned to the ethical and metaphysical possibilities in his music, Lewis’s latest compositions, with their fantastic and quite magnetic surfaces, invite us to experience a certain dissenting sense of perplexity.

George Lewis asks us to consider how a temporal experiment—one that employs a novel set of compositional procedures related to repetition—might allow us to grasp ontological issues within our own forms of life. These sounds remain, in many ways, abysses of meaning; delightfully, no exact correlation will be able to guide the listener to link sounds to a time both already there and somehow unforeseen.

—Michael Gallope

George E. Lewis, Edwin H. Case Professor of American Music at Columbia University and Adjunct Professor of Composition, Monash University, is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy. His other honors include a MacArthur Fellowship (2002), a Guggenheim Fellowship (2015), a United States Artists Walker Fellowship (2011), an Alpert Award in the Arts (1999), and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts. Lewis holds the degrees of Doctor of Music (DMus, honoris causa) University of Edinburgh, and Doctor of Humane Letters (honoris causa), New College of Florida.

Lewis studied composition with Muhal Richard Abrams at the AACM School of Music, and trombone with Dean Hey. A member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) since 1971, Lewis’s work in electronic and computer music, interactive installations, and notated and improvisative forms is documented on more than 150 recordings, as presented by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, London Philharmonia Orchestra, Mivos Quartet, London
and Katherine Young. Dal Niente’s recordings have been released on the New Amsterdam, Parlour Tapes+, and Carrier labels. The ensemble’s name, Dal Niente (“from nothing” in Italian), is a tribute to Helmut Lachenmann’s *Dal niente (Interieur III)*, and also a reference to the group’s humble beginnings.

**Mnemosyn**  
Emma Hospelhorn, flutes; Katie Schoepflin, clarinets; John Corkill, percussion; Mabel Kwan, piano; Tarn Travers, violin; Ammie Brod, viola; Chris Wild, cello; Michael Lewanski, conductor

**Hexis**  
Emma Hospelhorn, flutes; Katie Schoepflin, clarinets; John Corkill, percussion; Mabel Kwan, piano; Tarn Travers, violin; Chris Wild, cello; Michael Lewanski, conductor

**The Mangle of Practice**  
Winston Choi, piano; Minghuan Xu, violin

**Assemblage**  
Emma Hospelhorn, flutes; Katie Schoepflin, clarinets; Taimur Sullivan, saxophone; Gregory Beyer, percussion; Ben Melsky, harp; Winston Choi, piano; Minghuan Xu, violin; Ammie Brod, viola; Chris Wild, cello; Michael Lewanski, conductor

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**SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY**


*Changing With the Times*. New World Records 80434-2.

*Creative Construction Set*. George Lewis and Splitter Orchester. Mikroton CD 50.

*Endless Shout* Tzadik Records TZ 7054.

Les Exercices Spirituels. Tzadik Records TZ 8081.

Sequel (For Lester Bowie): A Composition for Cybernetic Improvisors. Intakt Records CD 111.


Sour Mash. George Lewis and Marina Rosenfeld. Innova Recordings 228.


The Will to Adorn. George Lewis and International Contemporary Ensemble. Tundra/New Focus Recordings tun005.

Voyager. Avant AVAN 041.

Producers: George Lewis, Joe Clark, Michael Lewanski, Chris Wild

Engineer: Dan Nichols

Recorded at Northern Illinois University Recital Hall on August 27 & 28, 2016.

Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions Inc., NYC


Design: Bob Defrin Design Inc.

All works published by Dasein Music BMI.

This recording was made possible by a grant from the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trust.

Thanks to the McKim Fund in the Library of Congress for commissioning The Mangle of Practice.

Thanks to the Bowling Green State University New Music Festival for commissioning Assemblage.

Thanks to New Music USA.

Thanks to the Talea Ensemble for kind permission to record Mnemosis and to the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players for kind permission to record Hexis.

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