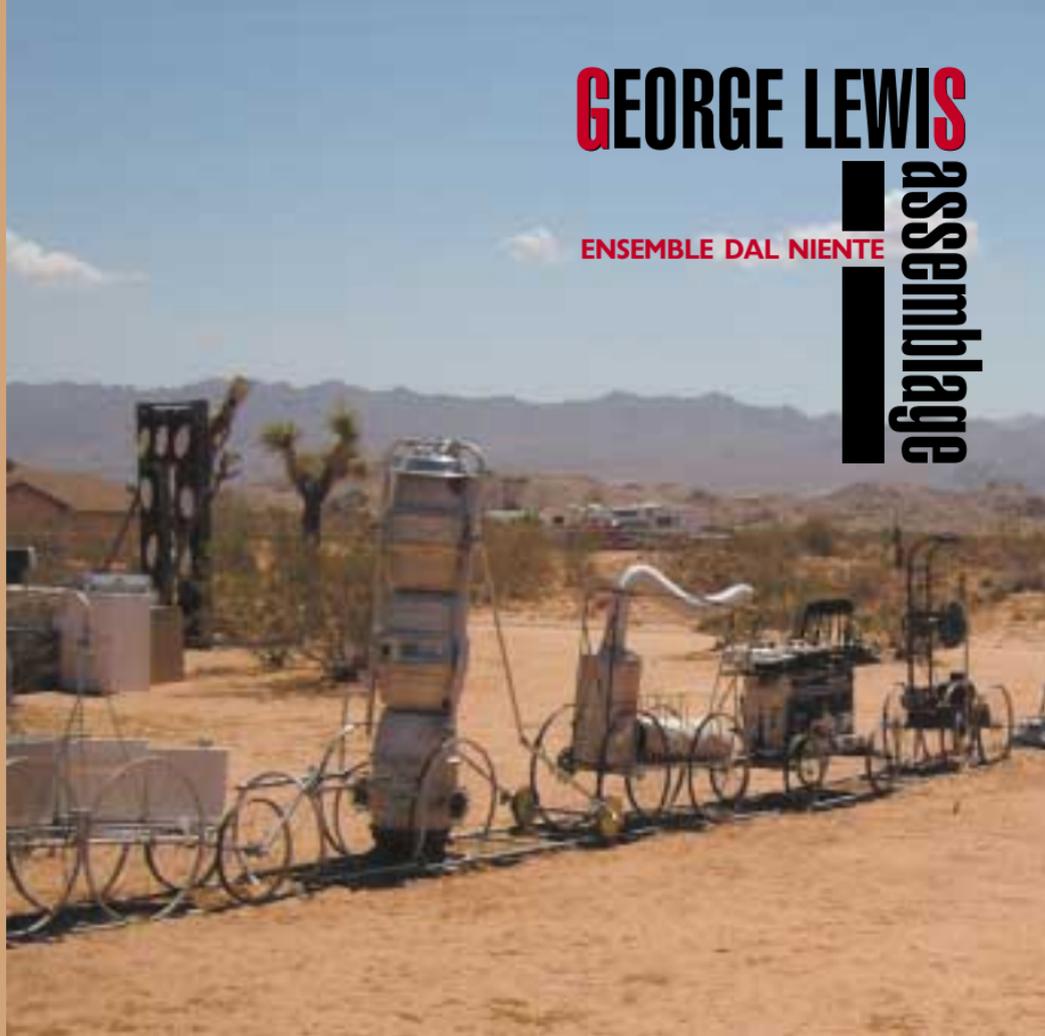


GEORGE LEWIS

Assemblage

ENSEMBLE DAL NIENTE



GEORGE LEWIS

(b. 1952)

assemblage

ENSEMBLE DAL NIENTE

1. *Mnemosis* (2012) 13:45
(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)
4. *Assemblage* (2013) 14:37
(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



New World Records, 20 Jay Street, Suite 1001, Brooklyn, NY 11201

Tel (212) 290-1680 Fax (646) 224-9638

info@newworldrecords.org www.newworldrecords.org

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George Lewis: Temporal Assemblages as Critical Forms

George Lewis is a boundary-crossing visionary who combines an astonishing level of creativity with trenchant critiques of many traditional conceptions about experimental music. Details of his biography attest to his extraordinary accomplishments as a trombonist, composer, collaborator, improviser, scholar, teacher, and creative persona. From age 19, in his hometown of Chicago, Lewis was a member of the AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians). He also studied philosophy at Yale, worked as a trombonist in bands for years, served as a curator at The Kitchen, developed *Voyager*, an early and groundbreaking software capable of improvising with live performers, and co-founded a pioneering doctoral program in Critical Studies and Experimental Practices at UC–San Diego. More recently, Lewis took an endowed professorship at Columbia University in 2004, published a monumental history of the AACM in 2008, garnered a MacArthur “genius” fellowship and honorary doctorates, and completed a new series of acclaimed commissions.

In 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 *Shadowgraph* series of five 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 Improvisers Orchestra, was inspired by Wittgenstein.¹

¹ See George Lewis, *The Shadowgraph Series: Compositions for Creative Orchestra*, with the NOW Orchestra (Spool, 2001); *The George Lewis Solo Trombone Record* (Sackville 3012); Lewis, *Les Exercices Spirituels* (Tzadik 8081); and “Making *Tractatus*: GIO Fest 2012,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5RSurLiBfA>.

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.² In writing about his *Voyager* environment, Lewis discusses the way complex and multi-faceted tropes and forms in black music have historically been devalued or silenced as “noise.”³ In concert with the tradition of black musical modernism expounded upon variously by Amiri Baraka, Samuel Floyd, Fred Moten, and many others, Lewis’s scholarship recasts black “noise” as cosmopolitan resistance to the traditional matrix of the culture industry. Thus, in an age saturated by predictable entertainments, for Lewis, referencing various strains of Afro-modernism—particularly their experimental variants—offers a mode of historically attuned dissent.

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

² See, for example, George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (University of Chicago Press, 2008) and his pioneering article, “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” *Black Music Research Journal* 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1996): 91–122.

³ George E. Lewis, “Too Many Notes: Complexity and Culture in *Voyager*,” *Leonardo Music Journal* 10 (2000): 33–39.

for flute, clarinet, violin, viola, cello, piano, and a percussionist, features repeated cells of dissonant interlocking lines that take shape as elaborate, even baroque loops.⁴ In this work, Lewis makes expansive use of extended techniques (a salient opening sound is the scraping of a coiled bass string on the piano). The overall impression is one of a clock with several hands turning unpredictably in different directions, triggering an oddball circus of sounds, recurring asynchronously, sometimes raucously.

To achieve this effect, Lewis employs multiple layers of repetition. There is a fairly obvious surface-level repetition upon looking at the score—the abundant use of repeat bars. But there are also deeper, larger scale consistencies, variously deployed, that result in complex and changing, almost hallucinatory, impressions. Lewis explains it as follows:

You construct overlaps so people can't really tell. It's sort of like syncopation in slow motion. You have three bars that repeat, or two bars that repeat, and then you insert two or three bars that don't repeat. And then you go back to another repeat that sounds sort of like the first repeat, but it's a little bit different. And so things sort of crawl along. They accumulate and accrete, and you start to experience entropy.⁵

Hexis (2013), written for the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, appears as something of a slightly smaller and shorter sequel to *Mnemosis*, and is scored for the same band of instruments, but without viola.⁶ The Greek term *bexis* is usually translated as “state” or “disposition” and often applies to a person's way of life; it has

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 24, 2013, at the Herbst Theatre, San Francisco.

been defined by William Peterson as “the fixed tendency that results from repeated acts.”⁷ 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 *bexis* 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.”⁸ In other words, *bexis* 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.

⁷ Quintilian, *Institutionis oratoriae Liber X*, ed. William Peterson, 2nd ed., Clarendon, 1903. Reprint, Clarendon Press, 1962, 12n. Quoted in Glyn P. Norton, “Improvisation, Time, and Opportunity in the Rhetorical Tradition,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies, Volume 1*, ed. George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, 262–88 (Oxford University Press, 2016), 268.

⁸ Norton, “Improvisation, Time, and Opportunity,” 268.

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 *Twittering 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

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, 59–80 (Routledge, 1984).

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.

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹² Conversation between George Lewis and Michael Gallope.

¹³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (Routledge, [1921] 2001), 87. In the original: “Wenn man unter Ewigkeit nicht unendliche Zeitdauer, sondern Unzeitlichkeit versteht, dann lebt er ewig, der in der Gegenwart lebt.”

¹⁴ Jerrold Levinson, *Music in the Moment* (Cornell University Press, 1997).

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.”¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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

¹⁵ *Assemblage* was premiered by Ensemble Dal Niente on October 18, 2013 at the Bowling Green New Music Festival at Bowling Green State University in Ohio.

¹⁶ On Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of assemblage see Manuel DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016) and Thomas Nail, “What is An Assemblage?” *SubStance* 142, Vol. 46, no. 1 (2017): 21–37. For the primary text see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

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

¹⁷ Lewis compares his own process of self-scavenging to Pierre Boulez’s redeployment of elements from previous compositions in new works. See George E. Lewis, “Pierre Boulez: 1925–2016,” *Artforum* (May 2016): 77–80.

¹⁸ Conversation between George Lewis and Michael Gallope.

for violinist Minghuan Xu and pianist Winston Choi, both of Ensemble Dal Niente.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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,

¹⁹ *The Mangle of Practice* was commissioned by the McKim Fund in the Library of Congress. It was premiered on October 30, 2014, at the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Auditorium, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁰ Andrew Pickering, “The Mangle of Practice: Agency and Emergence in the Sociology of Science,” *American Journal of Sociology* 99, No. 3 (Nov. 1993): 559–89.

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

Michael Gallope is Assistant Professor of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota. He is the author of Deep Refrains: Music, Philosophy, and the Ineffable (University of Chicago Press, 2017), and performer on over a dozen recordings in genres that range from experimental music to Sierra Leonean “bubu” music.

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

Sinfonietta, Spektral Quartet, Talea Ensemble, Ensemble Dal Niente, Ensemble Pamplemousse, Wet Ink, American Composers Orchestra, International Contemporary Ensemble, Harvestworks, Ensemble Either/Or, Turning Point Ensemble, San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, 2010 Vancouver Cultural Olympiad, IRCAM, Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra, and others.

Lewis has served as Fromm Visiting Professor of Music, Harvard University; Ernest Bloch Visiting Professor of Music, University of California, Berkeley; Paul Fromm Composer in Residence, American Academy in Rome; Resident Scholar, Center for Disciplinary Innovation, University of Chicago; and CAC Fitt Artist in Residence, Brown University. Lewis is the co-editor of the two-volume *Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* (2016), and his book, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (University of Chicago Press, 2008) received the American Book Award and the American Musicological Society's Music in American Culture Award.

Ensemble Dal Niente is a 22-member Chicago-based contemporary music collective. Since its founding in 2004, the group has premiered hundreds of new works including *Assemblage* and *The Mangle of Practice* by George Lewis, both of which were written for the ensemble. Dal Niente's programming, brought to life by its flexible instrumentation, challenges convention and creates engaging, inspiring, and immersive experiences that connect audiences with the music of today. In 2012, the group became the first-ever ensemble to win the Kranichstein Music Prize for interpretation at the Darmstadt Summer Courses. The group's regular activities include a Chicago concert season, national and international tours, residencies at universities and festivals across the U.S. and abroad, and performance collaborations with a wide range of composers, including Mark Andre, Marcos Balter, Eliza Brown, Raphael Cendo, Murat Çolak, Chaya Czernowin, Enno Poppe, Rebecca Saunders, Greg Saunier,

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. www.dalniente.com

Mnemosis

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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The Will to Adorn. George Lewis and International Contemporary Ensemble. Tundra/New Focus Recordings tun005.
Voyager. Avant AVAN 014.

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Tel (212) 290-1680 Fax (646) 224-9638

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