

Thursday Evening, February 17, 2022, at 7:30

The Juilliard School

presents

AXIOM

Jeffrey Milarsky, *Music Director and Conductor*

GEORGE LEWIS (b. 1952) **Assemblage** (2013)

MARCOS BALTER (b. 1974) **Bladed Stance** (2013)

Intermission

ANTHONY BRAXTON (b. 1945) **Composition No. 46** (1975)

TANIA LEÓN (b. 1943) **Indigena** (1991)

Performance time: approximately 1 hour and 20 minutes, including an intermission

This concert is part of Carnegie Hall's citywide Afrofuturism Festival.

We would like to thank composer George Lewis for his help in curating tonight's program.

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About the Program

By Matthew Mendez

Introduction

In the early 1990s, a group of Black intellectuals, science fiction enthusiasts, and theorists of what was then called “cyberculture” put a name on what was already, in some respects, an old phenomenon: Afrofuturism. Offering a much needed shorthand for a set of aesthetic strategies shared by a range of artists who sometimes seemed to have little else in common, Afrofuturism came to refer to a distinctively Black attunement to technological change, science fiction tropes, and speculative visions of the future, all of it springing from an Afrodiasporic sense of historical memory—of the consciousness of enslavement and the violent erasure of roots. Almost from the start, it was acknowledged that many of the pivotal Afrofuturist trailblazers were musicians, above all the visionary bandleader Sun Ra as well as George Clinton and his Parliament-Funkadelic collective. They were early and innovative adopters of new technology, which they married to the era’s deep interest in space travel and the consciousness-expanding possibilities of alternate universes. Yet there is a broader sense in which, as some might argue, black composition has always had an Afrofuturist streak. When, for instance, Duke Ellington evoked the deeply symbolic sounds of locomotives in his big band charts, he was gesturing at nothing less than a “new future”—of the promise of mobility and redefinition during the age of the Great Migration. In this way, maybe Afrofuturism is simply another way of naming the Black experimental tradition itself, in all its openness to unheard-of possibilities. As George Lewis, who helped curate tonight’s concert, writes, “this kind of experimentalism can take many forms, draw from many

histories, confront different methodological challenges, and manifest a self-awareness as being in dialogue with the music of the whole earth—all while emerging from a Black environment.”

Assemblage

GEORGE LEWIS

Born: July 14, 1952, in Chicago

Composer, trombonist, creative improviser, computer musician, and installation artist; historian, teacher, curator, moral conscience, and intellectual agent provocateur. Although George Lewis is all these things and more, to emphasize any one of them at the expense of the others would be to do a disservice to one of the most versatile and forward-thinking musical minds of our time. From his early work as a member of the celebrated avant-garde composers’ collective, the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), starting at the precociously early age of 19, to his current position as the Edwin H. Case Professor of American Music at Columbia University, Lewis has been consistently committed to shaking up the belief systems that have long given musical experimentalism its shape and substance. For decades, Lewis has been questioning deep-rooted ideas about the relationship between composition and improvisation, and especially, the pernicious assumption that Black creative expression and avant-garde envelope-pushing are somehow mutually exclusive—what Lewis calls experimentalism’s “myth of Black absence.” Lewis knows whereof he speaks: A trailblazer in the field of interactive computer music, he is the brains behind *Voyager*, a groundbreaking “software agent” programmed to improvise with human performers in real time. As the sociologist Herman Gray characterizes the political stakes of Lewis’ computer work, he is concerned to shed

light on as well as to transcend “the deeply embedded terms in which race ... organizes new digital information technologies despite their being presented as neutral, unmarked, and beyond cultural politics.” For Lewis, computers are not “universal” machines. Social artifacts like any others, they instead reflect the values and assumptions of their creators—which means that they can also be “programmed otherwise” to reflect alternative values, like the promise of freedom that comes with the truly unforeseen.

Few of Lewis’ scores for acoustic instruments exemplify that ethic of unforeseeability better than his nine-piece *Assemblage*, about whose moment-to-moment evolution he has written: “What I’m looking for are quick, recursive reversals that generate a feeling of being far from equilibrium, encouraging listeners to do what we do best—stay in the moment and be ready for anything.” Fittingly for Lewis, a Yale philosophy major who spent part of the 1980s living in Paris, the title is a reference to a French philosophical-sociological school of thought, one of whose keynote concepts is the “assemblage” (the original French is *agencement*, for “arrangement,” “fitting,” or “layout”). For writers in this tradition, the heterogeneous, extempore quality of the “assemblage”—a little bit of this, a touch of that—makes it an apt metaphor for the fundamentally improvisational nature of social interaction as well as a good way of thinking through the virtues of becoming over being, entanglement over separateness, and complex development over linear cause-and-effect. Lewis seems to have been interested in translating some of these ideas into compositional terms, and if the result is an unpredictable, ad hoc feel—*Assemblage*’s sudden splices and jump cuts—the composer is nevertheless quick to point out that this

by no means implies that the music lacks moment-to-moment logic: “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.”

A second reference point was the visual assemblage—three-dimensional mixed-media sculptures or installations in which found objects and ready-made materials of diverse provenance mingle. Lewis mentions several Black artists from this tradition, including Noah Purifoy, David Hammons, Betye Saar, and John Outterbridge, each of whom made creative use of ephemera and discarded objects often associated with Black life; in so doing, their work can be understood as suggesting that identity categories are themselves constructs of a kind, or assemblages. Instead of citing found sounds attributable to other composers, however, Lewis began *Assemblage* by assembling a trove of musical textures, scraps, and loops of his own devising, each of which he then approached as if it were an object he was discovering for the first time. (He refers to the process as “self-scavenging.”) Moreover, Lewis revels in finding sonic equivalents to the junkyard detritus from which artists like Purifoy and Outterbridge constructed their art objects, and *Assemblage* can be listened to as an exercise in “distressing” the familiar sounds of its chamber ensemble—for instance, by reimagining the strings, harp, and piano as pitch-less scrapers; by instructing the percussionist to play the xylophone with the wrong side of the sticks, culling the instrument’s characteristic “bite”; and by abrading pitched passages with sour, “weather-beaten” microtonal sonorities.

Bladed Stance

MARCOS BALTER

Born: April 1, 1974, in Rio de Janeiro

"In a lot of ways, abstraction is almost a white privilege these days," muses Marcos Balter, referring to the deeply entrenched assumption that the music of composers of color will invariably reflect the personal identities of its creators. By contrast, Balter notes, white composers have not usually been subject to the same expectations. They are free to write in any style they choose, including highly formalized idioms that shut out the extramusical factors of heritage, personal history, and race, without ever being second-guessed by tastemakers. Balter's point is not that questions of personal identity should be off limits. Rather, it is that composers of color should be free to engage with them in their music on their own terms—only when it suits them, and without the compulsion of a double standard.

There is a reason why Balter, born and raised in Brazil but residing in the U.S. since early adulthood, has emerged as one of the new music scene's most outspoken voices around issues like these. As a South American composer of color coming of age in the predominantly white world of U.S. "classical" music, Balter often found himself expected to occupy something like what the Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot once called the "savage slot"—the presumption being that his music would follow in the "exotic," "primitivist" vein of his 20th-century countryman Heitor Villa-Lobos. But the story of Balter's career has instead been one of a steadfast refusal to conform to anyone else's expectations of what a Brazilian-born composer's music should or should not sound like. Balter has simply been himself, pursuing an ecumenical synthesis between varied forms of musical abstraction—in particular, between the timbral imagination of

spectralism and the patterned order of minimalism. It is a measure of the richness of that synthesis as well as of Balter's reputation as a uniquely convivial collaborator that he has been a favorite of some of the leading new music virtuosos of the younger generation, including the flutist Claire Chase and the violist Nadia Sirota, both Juilliard Creative Associates.

Commissioned by yMusic, the "post-genre" sextet which Sirota cofounded, the compact *Bladed Stance* is an especially attractive example of Balter's syncretic outlook. On one hand, it features many of the attributes typically associated with minimalism, including a steady pulse, interlocking rhythmic patterns, and a complex interplay between harmonic stasis and intricate local texture. On the other hand, *Bladed Stance* harnesses musical color to produce timbral hybrids and auditory illusions that blur the lines between instruments—a characteristically spectralist preoccupation. Sirota points to an illustrative example, recalling how Balter "figured out that trumpet with a practice mute would match, almost exactly, short harmonics on the cello." *Bladed Stance's* deliberate indistinction—its play with sounds and their physical sources—ends up giving it an ethereal, disembodied quality, which is further underscored through the addition of electronic reverb and whistling sounds (the latter a favorite Balter device). Yet this delicately shimmering sound-world could hardly be further removed from the associations elicited by its title; "bladed stance" refers to the body posture law enforcement officers are taught to assume, weapon in hand, when approaching a suspect. (More questionably, police officers have sometimes used the term in reverse, to characterize suspicious or threatening behavior.) The vast gulf between the sound of this music and its title's connotations suggests that one way of hearing *Bladed Stance* is as a kind of "refuge" from the

all-too-routine violence against non-white bodies that continues to blight the world outside the concert hall.

Composition No. 46

ANTHONY BRAXTON

Born: June 4, 1945, in Chicago

Any shortlist of the truly, indispensably visionary creative thinkers of the late 20th century, whatever the artistic medium, would have to include composer, improviser, multi-instrumentalist, and musical philosopher Anthony Braxton. Over the course of more than five decades of artistic activity that has been breathtaking in its sheer scope, variety, and ambition, Braxton has aimed at building a comprehensive virtual world of musical creativity, one in which ostensible opposites like composition/improvisation and experimental/traditional cease to function as restrictive straitjackets. Like Lewis, a favorite collaborator during the mid-1970s, Braxton came of age as a member of the AACM, and he absorbed a number of that organization's core values, including its all-inclusive ideas about what a Black artist could be, and its emphasis on intellectual and economic self-determination in the face of political and ideological misrepresentations of Black musicianship. Indeed, Braxton has long been committed to improving what he calls the "information dynamics" surrounding Black cultural achievement—as historian Robin D.G. Kelley puts it with respect to the AACM writ large—to "reconstructing African memory and art in a North American context." (Braxton's preferred example is ancient Egypt as an empowering reminder that African culture was the starting point for "Western civilization.") Above all, though, Braxton has been concerned to stress that composers of African descent have been producing notated music for a very long time, and that the denial of this reality has had pernicious effects upon musicians of all identities.

While he considers himself to be very much "in the tradition" of his saxophone heroes Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and Paul Desmond, Braxton has always rejected the "jazz" label, observing that it has too often been used to designate what he dubs a "sanctioned zone" of "acceptable" Black artistry. Refusing to limit himself to that zone, Braxton has drawn inspiration from Karlheinz Stockhausen and Richard Wagner as well as Ornette Coleman and Scott Joplin. The result, as Braxton likes to refer to it, has been his distinctive brand of "trans-idiomatic," genre-agnostic artistry—to borrow a favorite Duke Ellington expression, a musical oeuvre that is, simply, "beyond category." Admittedly, this has sometimes made life difficult: "As a young guy, my work was viewed as the essence of that which was not Black. ... [W]hatever I would do, it would be judged whether it was Black—"authentically Black," I think that would be the phrase. As if people with dark complexions have only one kind of way of thinking." Happily, recent years have seen a reappraisal of Braxton's place in the pantheon of Black music—in 2014, he was named a National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master—though the concert music world has continued to lag in acknowledging his compositional stature.

Reflecting the modular, Lego block-like quality of his musical universe, Braxton's compositions are all labeled, simply, with a number and an identifying symbol of letters, numbers, and often, abstract shapes or images. (Braxton welcomes interpretive reconfiguration of his work, including the simultaneous, i.e., "modular," performance of multiple pieces.) Written for ten-piece ensemble of woodwinds and brass, Composition No. 46 is fully notated and is structured as a series of what Braxton calls "sound moments" or "moment pockets." This is a deliberate homage to the work of Anton Webern and Stockhausen, and in particular, the latter's conception of

“moment form,” in which isolated musical events were made to hang together like a mobile, without necessary connections linking one event to another, and without any one of the events having structural priority over the rest.

Braxton explains the vision behind Composition No. 46 in more detail: “The reality of this work attempts to solidify a context for ‘sound being’ that respects the nature of the moment as well as its own separate purposes.” For one, Braxton is plainly interested in something like John Cage’s ideal of “letting sounds be themselves”—of showing deference to the autonomy of individual musical events. At the same time, as Braxton makes clear, the point of Composition No. 46’s “suspended sound shapes” is not simply to present a series of disconnected musical aphorisms. “Sounds in themselves” is just a starting point, with Braxton characterizing Composition No. 46 as a “forum” in which the instrumentalists are meant to test out various ways of bridging sounds and establishing musical continuity (the “separate purposes” to which he alludes). For Braxton, the fact that various sounds can be connected in such different ways implies a multiplicity of perspectives, an effect he also aims to foster by suggesting that some of the performers should sit facing in unorthodox positions. As the jazz writer Bill Shoemaker notes, “the aim of such spatial considerations is to have a performance perceived so differently by various audience members that, in essence, several performances are heard simultaneously.”

For Braxton, music has long been a form of spiritual discipline, and so his play on words, “sound being,” should not be ignored either. Sidestepping “classical” notions about more or less “accurate”

interpretations of musical works, or of “right” and “wrong” ways to perform on an instrument, Braxton considers performance to be a medium of self-realization—“a vehicle to establish the musician’s spiritual and vibrational reality,” he writes, and a means of “affirming the whole of their ‘life position’.” In Composition No. 46, the intense attention required to link even the simplest of musical moments becomes the opportunity for Braxton to invite the instrumentalists to join him in nurturing their own “sound beings.”

Indigena

TANIA LEÓN

Born: May 14, 1943, in Havana

Those in the know have long considered Tania León a national treasure, but for many years the secret was stubbornly slow in getting out. However, after being awarded the 2021 Pulitzer Prize in music for *Stride*, her orchestral tribute to Susan B. Anthony, it appears that León may finally be getting her due. Born in Cuba, where she received her conservatory training, León left the country in 1967, in the wake of the Castro revolution, after getting a seat on one of the U.S. government’s freedom flights. León resettled in New York, and through sheer hard work and determination, she quickly came to the attention of the legendary dancer-choreographer Arthur Mitchell, who had just founded the Dance Theatre of Harlem. León took the position of music director, and it was at Mitchell’s suggestion that she began to try her hand at composing, with a string of scores for his troupe in the 1970s. More opportunities soon followed, including, in addition to coursework at Juilliard, León’s pioneering programming and outreach efforts for the Brooklyn Philharmonic on behalf of composers of color, and later, collaborations with some of the foremost literary minds of the day,

including poet Rita Dove, intellectual Henry Louis Gates Jr., Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka, and director Robert Wilson.

A naturalized citizen of this country for many years, León is not, as has often been asserted, a Cuban or Afro-Cuban composer, but rather, a “U.S. composer of Cuban heritage”—a misunderstanding that reflects longstanding assumptions about who gets to be called an American composer at all. In the end, though, León prefers to think of herself as a citizen of the world, and like all the composers featured on this program, she has long been suspicious of the ways identity labels have been used to limit the breadth of non-white creative activity. As León stated as long ago as 1986: “I am nothing [that] people want to call me. They do not know who I am. The fact that I am using this physical costume does not describe my energy, does not describe my entity.”

Composed in 1991, *Indígena* is León’s attempt at coming to terms with her experiences of displacement and exile—of her separation from friends and loved ones, and her double estrangement from the country of her birth as well as the country that became her new home. A dozen years after resettling in the U.S., León was able to return to Cuba for the first time. In his recently published biography of León, the music historian Alejandro Madrid describes one of the composer’s most painful memories of that return trip. After hearing her in conversation, León’s three-year-old nephew, Alain, asked: “Why does she speak so funny?” Madrid elaborates:

She arrived in the United States without knowing a word of English and had a hard struggle to learn the language and assimilate into a society that was completely foreign to her.

But apparently, this also disguised her Cubanness, her [Spanish] accent. ... Her Cuban family, her closest relatives, did not find it familiar anymore. It was as if Alain’s question tacitly implied “you do not belong here anymore.”

Throughout the 1970s, León worked with the spiky, abstract sounds of what was then the international-modernist lingua franca. It was an effort, she now acknowledges, to blend in. But encounters like the one with Alain led her to reconsider her musical language—to embrace her own singular accent. Among other things, this would require León to tap into musical memories from her childhood, like the sounds of the *batá* drums that accompanied the *Regla de Ocha* (*santería*) ceremonies in which her grandmother had participated. Yet *Indígena* is not interested in ethnographic reproduction for its own sake. True to León’s own experiences, in *Indígena*, the odds and ends of various Cuban vernacular genres instead rub shoulders with modernist fragmentation and pointillism, and in this way, the title can be understood as posing a question: “What does it mean to be indigenous in the first place?” The score’s first half seems to reflect something of this uncertainty. Featuring a series of demonstrative, “vocal” wind solos, each a rendering of the spoken cadences of someone León encountered on her return to Cuba, the overall impression is of being spoken to, but without—disorientingly—being able to get a word in edgewise.

Elsewhere, however, *Indígena* does take its title at face value. León has characterized her nephew as “the most indigenous person” in her family, offering, colorfully, that Alain was as much at home in Cuba as “a mango” or “a palm tree.” Correspondingly, *Indígena*’s second half is much more at ease

with its surroundings, as it were, featuring an extended evocation of a trumpet-led *comparsa* (a Cuban carnival procession). León also signifies “home” in a more personal way, when the percussionist starts using porcelain mugs as noisemakers: As a child, León remembers, her family would sit around the dinner table and improvise, using only plates, cups, and silverware. To borrow a play on words found in Madrid’s biography, *Indígena* appears torn, between roots as symbolized by Alain’s indigeneity, and the routes traversed by León as an exiled, uprooted individual. *Indígena* concludes on an ambivalent note, with a dreamy, fragmented echo, on piano, of a characteristic Cuban rhythmic pattern. If this at first seems to imply that the roots

have won the day, León offers that the brief codetta represents her plane leaving Cuba, with *sul ponticello* violins lingering like the routes traced by vapor trails. Maybe it is safest to say, then, that if in *Indígena*, there are no routes without roots, then it is even more true that for León, fixation on roots has never gotten in the way of forging new, future-oriented routes.

Matthew Mendez is a New Haven-based musicologist and critic who specializes in 20th- and 21st-century repertoire. A graduate of Harvard University and a Ph.D. candidate at Yale, he was the recipient of a 2016 ASCAP Foundation Deems Taylor/Virgil Thomson Award for outstanding music journalism.

Meet the Artists



Peter Konekko

Jeffrey Milarsky

American conductor Jeffrey Milarsky (B.M. '88, M.M. '90, percussion) is the music director of AXIOM. Known for his innovative programming, he has been hailed for his interpretation of a wide range of repertoire, which spans from Bach to Xenakis. In recent seasons, he has worked with such orchestras as the New York Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Milwaukee Symphony, American Composers Orchestra, MET Chamber Ensemble, Bergen Philharmonic, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, New World Symphony, and Tanglewood Festival Orchestra. In the U.S. and abroad, he has premiered and recorded works by many groundbreaking contemporary composers in venues such as Carnegie Hall, Zankel Hall, Davies Symphony Hall, Alice Tully Hall, Walt Disney Concert Hall, Boston's Symphony Hall, and IRCAM in Paris. Milarsky has a long history of premiering, recording, and performing American composers; in keeping with that, in 2013 he was presented with the prestigious Ditson Conductor's Award. His interest and dedication has brought forth collaborations with esteemed composers such as Adams, Babbitt, Cage, Carter, Corigliano, Crumb, Davidovsky, Druckman, Gordon, Lang, Mackey, Rouse, Shapey, Subotnick, Wuorinen, and an entire generation of emerging composers. A dedicated teacher, Milarsky serves on the conducting faculty at Juilliard and is a senior lecturer in music at Columbia University, where he is the music director and conductor of the Columbia University Orchestra. An

in-demand timpanist and percussionist, Milarsky has been the principal timpanist for the Santa Fe Opera since 2005. In addition, he has performed and recorded with the New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, and Pittsburgh Symphony. He has recorded extensively for Angel, Bridge, Teldec, Telarc, New World, CRI, MusicMasters, EMI, Koch, and London records. Milarsky received his bachelor's and master's degrees at Juilliard, where he was awarded the Peter Mennin Prize for outstanding leadership and achievement in the arts.

AXIOM

AXIOM, led by music director Jeffrey Milarsky, is dedicated to performing the masterworks of the 20th- and 21st-century repertoire. Since its debut in Avery Fisher Hall (now David Geffen Hall) in 2006, the student-created group has established itself as a leading ensemble in New York City's contemporary music scene with performances throughout Lincoln Center, in addition to appearances at Columbia University's Miller Theatre and (Le) Poisson Rouge in Greenwich Village. AXIOM is grounded in Juilliard's curriculum. Students receive a credit for performing in the ensemble, and during any four-year period, AXIOM members will have the opportunity to perform works by John Adams, Harrison Birtwistle, Jacob Druckman, Marcus Lindberg, and Arnold Schoenberg, among other composers. Guest conductors of AXIOM have included Alan Gilbert, Susanna Mälkki, and David Robertson. In the truncated 2019-20 season, AXIOM performed works by Igor Stravinsky, Toru Takemitsu, Birtwistle, Elliott Carter, George Lewis, Morton Feldman, Philip Glass (Diploma '60, M.S. '62, composition), Pierre Boulez, Thomas Adès, and Melinda Wagner, chair of Juilliard's composition faculty. In the 2018-19 season, AXIOM performed Louis Andriessen's *De Staat* as part of the New York Philharmonic's Art of Andriessen

Festival, celebrated faculty member John Corigliano's 80th birthday, and concluded its season with works by Iannis Xenakis, Caroline Shaw, and Steve Reich ('61, composition). Highlights of the 2017-18 season included programs dedicated to Jacob Druckman (B.S. '54, M.S. '56, composition; faculty 1956-72) and Luciano Berio (faculty

1965-71) as well as a concert featuring Hans Abrahamsen's complete *Schnee*. In the 2016-17 season, AXIOM performed programs honoring composer John Adams on his 70th birthday, Reich on his 80th birthday, and a program devoted to the music of Kaija Saariaho.

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Rachel Qin

Saxophone

Chad Lilley

Piano

Ruogu Wen

Viola

Devin Moore

Clarinet/Bass Clarinet

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Will Hopkins

Harp

Tiffany Wong

Cello

Eliana Razzino Yang

BALTER *Bladed Stance*

Violin

Adrian Steele

Cello

Eliana Razzino Yang

Flute

Rachel Qin

Clarinet

William Foye

Viola

Devin Moore

Trumpet

David Green

BRAXTON *Composition No. 46*

Flute

JeongWon Lee

Clarinet

Jin Yingcun Jin

French Horn

David Alexander

Bass Trombone

Mirza Alkhairid

Oboe

Evan Yonce

Bass Clarinet

Jingrui Liu

Trumpet

David Green

Tuba

Chandler Currier

English Horn

Angela Scates

Trombone

Carlos Jiménez Fernández

LEÓN *Indigena*

First Violin

Adrian Steele

Cello

Eliana Razzino Yang

Oboe

Angela Scates

French Horn

David Alexander

Second Violin

Phoenix Avalon

Double Bass

Daniel Chan

Clarinet

Jin Yingcun Jin

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Bassoon

Tylor Thomas

Percussion

Will Hopkins

Piano

Ruogu Wen

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