

Synthesizers, saxophones, and one African grey parrot: The Other Minds music festival is a magnet for the avant-garde

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Charles Amirkhonian

By Micah Dubreuil

When Charles Amirkhonian was 5 years old, he received a [John Cage](#) record as a gift from his father. It was a mistake — the elder Amirkhonian had taken it to be an album of traditional Armenian music, their cultural heritage. Instead, young Charles was introduced to a sound that was anything but traditional, and in that music for prepared piano, he found a life's calling. Some 60-odd years later, the director of the [Other Minds festival](#) — the West Coast's premiere experimental music event, now in its 19th incarnation — points to that accident as a fairly fortuitous one.

Music is everywhere. Not just in the headphones mashed in every pocket, but in the sounds and systems of the world around us, from raindrops and birdcalls to trains and electronic circuits. That might, at first, sound overly lofty — but this concept has been a driving force for, among other things, hip-hop, arguably the dominant form of popular music over the last few decades. The impulse to investigate these sounds in unconventional and inventive ways has been equally significant in what's usually called avant-garde, experimental, or simply "new" music. Other Minds 19 will celebrate this music Feb. 28 and March 1, when the festival takes over the [SFJAZZ Center](#) for the first time. Nine composers, all with ties to Northern California, will present works that aim to explore and reveal the

world of sound through a variety of mediums, including wildly futuristic synthesizers, saxophones of unusual proportion, and one African grey parrot.

Of course, as more mainstream music has evolved over the course of the past two decades, so has the meaning of "avant-garde," says Amirkhanian; much of what was once considered radical has become ubiquitous. "Now that everybody has the ability to use GarageBand, and can take a sample of something and turn it into a hi-hat cymbal, I don't know if [needing to introduce avant-garde] is really a problem anymore," he says. While some pieces in the festival could be seen as quite challenging, the goal is "to surprise people pleasantly rather than violently" with what Amirkhanian calls "revealationary" as opposed than "revolutionary" new music.



Wendy Reid, with Lulu

Composer Wendy Reid, a lecturer at Mills College in Oakland, has always been fascinated by natural processes and the beauty of bird song. She takes a direct route to revealing these sounds: She writes and performs with Lulu, an African grey parrot.

"I love birds," says Reid simply. "They're the greatest musicians that we have." African grey parrots, in particular, are considered by many to be the most intelligent birds in the world. They can live more than 50 years, and have been known to carry out conversations with humans (not in the wild, presumably). Reid has always had birds as pets, or "family members," as she likes to think of them. She records the birds' songs, improvises along to the recordings, and composes bird-like sounds in order to engage Lulu, who responds as she feels fit.

Lulu is, to be sure, not a trained musician. She does not have notated parts or learned responses, and Reid stresses that this is "not a circus act" — to train or direct Lulu would compromise the natural musical responses that Reid finds so fascinating. "I let [the birds] be who they are; they are their best that way. People are their best that way, too."

The festival is named, in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek manner, after an obituary of John Cage, wherein the author dismissively wrote that Cage "[merely] created music in other people's minds." (If you've heard of any avant-garde composer, you've heard of Cage. **Philip Glass** might be a close second, and he performed at the first Other Minds in 1993). Cage's wide-ranging musical interests set a precedent that persists through this program. From Mark Applebaum's sound sculptures, to Charles Celeste Hutchins' live-generated digital projections (produced by self-developed software), to Myra Melford's solo piano performance (seemingly old-fashioned in this context, though it will sound nothing of the sort), the festival's intentionally non-thematic lineup covers an enormous variety of work. If ours are the "other minds" in question, they will be kept quite busy.



Roscoe Mitchell

Widely referred to as an "American iconoclast," living saxophone legend and prolific composer Roscoe Mitchell will present his composition *Nonaah*, arranged for four bass saxophones. If you've never heard or seen a bass saxophone, you're not alone: it's a rarely used instrument, larger than the more common baritone sax and with a deeper range, a full octave below the tenor. "One of the aspects of music that engages me is the sound, and the desire to know how all music works," Mitchell says of his penchant for performing on unusual woodwinds. *Nonaah* itself is a composition that dates back to 1976, when Mitchell performed it on solo alto saxophone for an initially skeptical crowd in Europe. He thoroughly won the room, and has been exploring the piece ever since.

"When I first imagined this work for alto saxophone, I had no idea that this composition would take on a life of its own," Mitchell says. After arranging the piece for alto sax quartet, he went on to write a

completely notated version for four cellos, followed by flute, bassoon and piano, chamber orchestra, orchestra, and now bass saxophone quartet. Multiple doctoral theses have been written on *Nonaah*, and Mitchell is currently planning on writing a book about it. "For me it's a kind of musical journey — it starts out a piece for alto saxophone, and now it's a piece for full orchestra." [See a video of Mitchell performing at a recent Exploratorium series below.]

Mitchell's is not the only journey that leads to Other Minds 19. The festival's line-up includes Donald Buchla, a prolific creator and founding father of sound synthesis who will be presenting the U.S. premiere of his composition *Drop by Drop*, as well as Joseph Byrd, one of the earliest adopters of synthesizers in rock 'n' roll. The entire program, in fact, is filled with either giants of the field or emerging stars.



Don Buchla

Yes, there will also be animals, instruments you've never seen before, and electronic controllers that may well remind you more of *Star Trek* than a concert hall. But, as Wendy Reid says, this is not a circus act: These are composers and improvisers pushing the boundaries of serious music. "There's a thirst among maybe 2 percent of the population to hear this music," says Amirkhanian, but the

people in this dedicated group hail from every corner of the globe — and, as young Charles personally discovered, from every demographic.

Other Minds 19

Fri/28 - Sat/1, 7pm discussion and 8pm concert both nights

\$25 - \$65

SFJazz Center

201 Franklin, SF

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