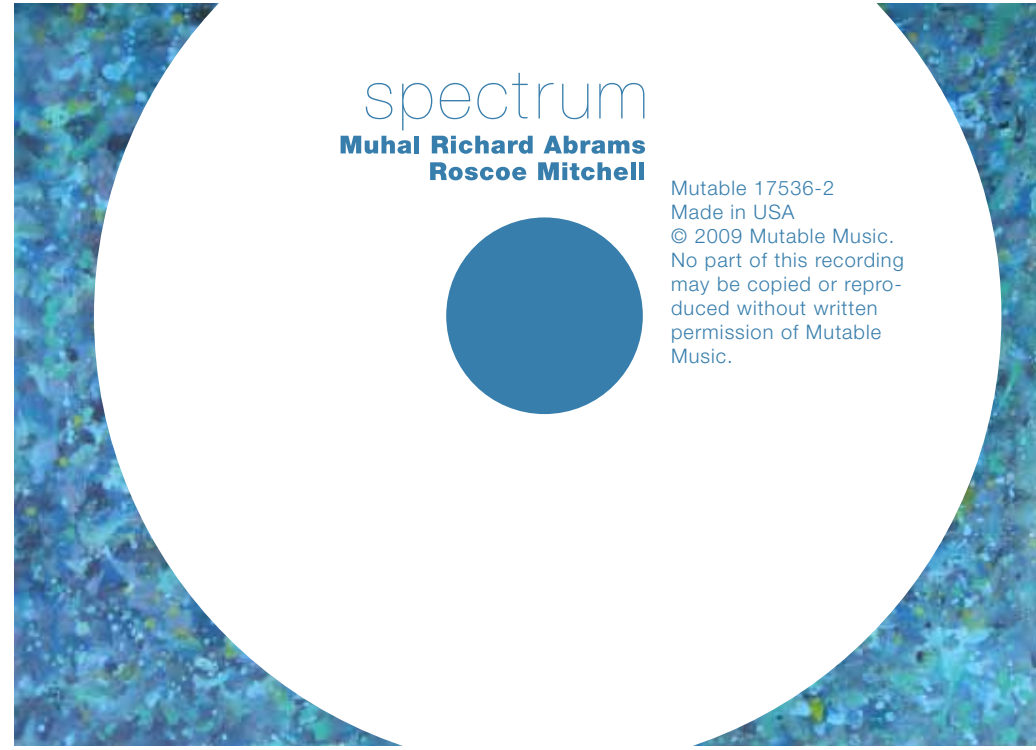
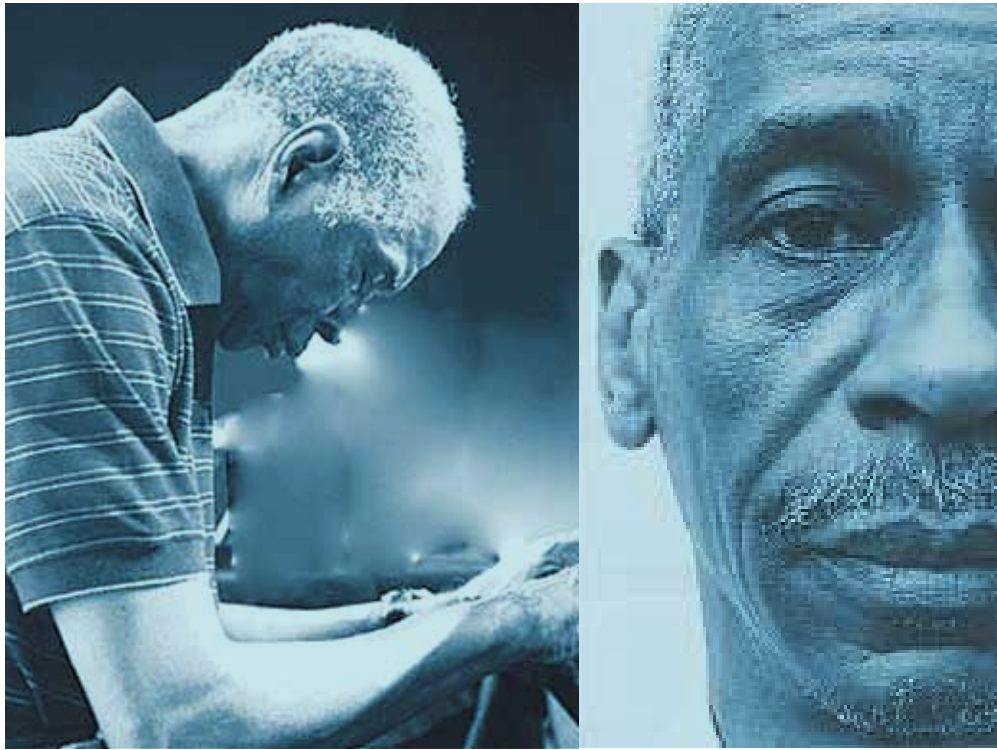


**Mihal Richard Abrams** Photo ©2009 Paul van Riel  
**Roscoe Mitchell** Photo ©2009 Joseph Blough



spectrum

Romu (11:51)

(Mihal Richard Abrams/Roscoe Mitchell)

**Mihal Richard Abrams** piano // **Roscoe Mitchell** saxophone

Non-Cognitive Aspects of the City

Non-Cognitive I (6:33) // Non-Cognitive II (2:03) // Non-Cognitive III (8:21)

(Composition: Roscoe Mitchell // Poem: Joseph Jarman)

**Thomas Buckner** baritone // **Janáček Philharmonic** // **Petr Kotik** conductor

Mergertone (17:15)

(Mihal Richard Abrams)

**Janáček Philharmonic** // **Petr Kotik** conductor

Recorded at **Philharmonic Hall**, Ostrava, Czech Republic // Recorded by  
**Jaroslav Stranavsky**, Music Master, Slovakia // Mastering **Tom Hamilton** //

Executive producer **Thomas Buckner** // Cover art **Mihal Richard Abrams** // Design **Carin Fortin**

**mutablemusic**

109 W 27th St 8th floor, New York, NY 10001, Phone: 212.627.0990

Fax: 212.627.5504, Email: info@mutablemusic.com, mutablemusic.com

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MURKIN DOB CAT

Mutable 17536-2 spectrum Mihal Richard Abrams // Roscoe Mitchell

**Mihal Richard Abrams**  
**Roscoe Mitchell**

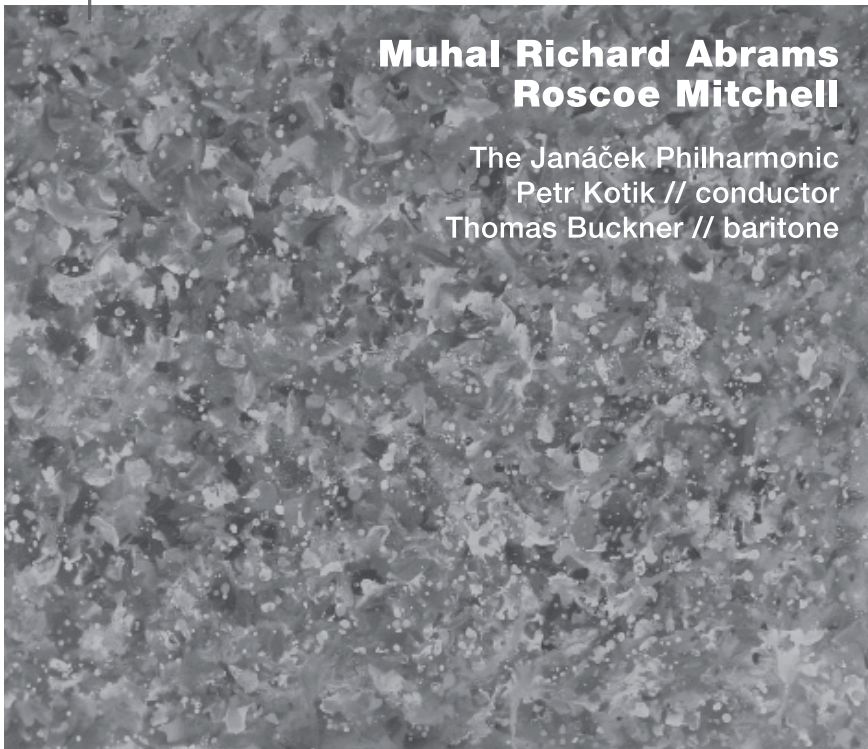
spectrum

The Janáček Philharmonic  
Petr Kotik // conductor  
Thomas Buckner // baritone

# spectrum

**Mihal Richard Abrams**  
**Roscoe Mitchell**

The Janáček Philharmonic  
Petr Kotik // conductor  
Thomas Buckner // baritone



# Muhai Richard Abrams, Roscoe Mitchell, and the Work of the Postcolonial Composer

**George E. Lewis**

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In 1960, the influential ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood coined the term “bimusicality” to describe the work of musicians of the Imperial Japanese Court, who were trained in both gagaku and pan-European classical traditions. As it happens, well before the publication of Hood’s article, musicians trained in jazz were already well known as practitioners of the bimusical. In 1930, William Grant Still, the man who later became known as “the Dean of African-American composers,” told the NAACP magazine *Opportunity* of his optimistic belief in the viability of a “Negro Symphony Orchestra.” This sanguine view was based on Still’s own experience as both composer and performer in classical, jazz, and popular idioms. Still predicted that for the players in such an orchestra, “their training in the jazz world will even have enhanced their virtuosity, and they will be able to play perfectly passages that would be difficult for a man trained only in the usual academic way.”

Still’s view points up the fact that for much of the 20th Century, the boundary between high and low culture in the United States has been symbolized musically by the great competition between the jazz and classical traditions, a discursive stand-in for a more fundamental cultural struggle.

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The metonymic dialectic between “composed” and “improvised” ways of producing musical texts serves to obscure a more fundamental constructed binary between the two most influential musical cultures of the 20th Century, the trans-European and trans-African.

From the twentieth-century modernism that produced the bimusicality of Hood, the “double consciousness” of WEB DuBois, and the composition-improvisation binary itself, we move with Roscoe Mitchell and Muhai Richard Abrams to a postmodern multidominance of consciousness that is emblematic of the hybrid practice of composers from the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. This recording, the first to feature their work with orchestral forces, has emerged from within a complex of struggle over definitions and identity to pose a more enlightening and fundamental question: What might a new American classical music sound like in a postcolonial world?

Certainly, such a new music would need to draw upon the widest range of traditions, while not being tied to any one—a music that would exist, as the French theorist Jacques Attali put it in the late 1970s, “in a multifaceted time in which rhythms, styles, and codes diverge, interdependencies

become more burdensome, and rules dissolve”— in short, a “new noise.” Indeed, Attali, the Frenchman, explicitly identified the AACM as having been fundamental to the origins of that new noise, and on this recording, Abrams and Mitchell produce it in all its multiplicity.

As I maintain in my 2008 book on the AACM’s history, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, the very beginnings of the AACM asserted a composer-centered artistic culture in which the composition-improvisation binary lacked any real force. AACM composers often sought to place their work in dialogue with diasporic traditions and histories from Africa and Europe, as well as Asia and the Middle East, while drawn to collage and interpenetration strategies that blended, opposed, or ironically juxtaposed cultures, practices, and traditions.

Muhai Richard Abrams has noted that the exploration of extended forms was a long-standing direction among AACM composers. “In Chicago,” he observed, “we were already looking at these things, and equipped to deal with them...When we came along, there was a whole sea change, a glitch, something that wasn’t there before. The compositions themselves showed that they were outside of the mainstream of jazz, and notice was taken by classical people. You can get access to these ensembles, and it started to happen.”

The noted German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus, in a little-noted 1979 think piece called “What is Improvisation,” uses the practice as a foil to try

to draw bright lines—to circle the wagons, as it were--around the notion of composition as an originary pan-European practice. Translating and paraphrasing from the original German, for Dahlhaus, a composition is an individually complete structure in itself, fully worked out, and fixed in written form in order to be performed. Moreover, what is worked out and notated must constitute the essential part of the aesthetic object that is constituted in the consciousness of the listener. Finally, the dialectic between composition and notation, according to Dahlhaus, is crucial to the notion of composition itself.

Against this definition, Dahlhaus’s notion of improvisation emerges in terms of a fundamental lack. The critic’s unsurprising single-mindedness of purpose, however, causes him to miss the importance of the ubiquity of improvisation, not just in music, but also in everyday life itself. In any event, by the mid-20th Century, compositional practice had already superseded Dahlhausian thinking, exhibiting a methodological hybridity that encouraged graphic elements and even improvisation, in articulation with or in place of traditional and extended notation.

As it happens, the bimusicality of Abrams and Mitchell is well represented on this recording, which includes scintillating examples of their improvised music as well as two composed works which conform in every way with Dahlhaus’s definition, including the absence of improvisation and the assertion of a dialectic with notation. At the same time, the postmodern musical



condition that Abrams and Mitchell helped usher into becoming resists such bright lines, and a retrospective of the work of these two composers will inevitably reveal their own resistance to such fixities. One cannot consider the entire corpus of the work of these two composer-performers and conclude from this recording that they are artificially separating the two practices. Instead, as with the best sense in which the Dahlhaus essay can be taken, Abrams and Mitchell treat the two practices here as different media, with differing requirements, problems, and possibilities.

The multiplicity of practice evinced by these two composers obliges us to question a Western public intellectual life that still seems bogged down in binary systems--black white, composition-improvisation, ant-grasshopper, bourgeois-populist, the blues people versus the jazz people. Yet if the challenge of the dialectic with notation persists, in the postcolonial environment such challenges become the province of the planet, and on this recording, we hear a wide-ranging musicality by two mature artists who continue to meet that challenge.

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**George E. Lewis** is Case Professor of American Music at Columbia University.

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