

## **MUTED**

*A collective work by 4 composers for violin, voice, whisperviolin, frame violin, a multitude of mutes, and light design*

Monica Germino, violin / voice

Floriaan Ganzevoort & Isabel Nielen, Theatermachine / Stage and Lighting Design

Composers: Michael Gordon, Julia Wolfe, David Lang, and Louis Andriessen

Text: Don Marquis' *Archy and Mehitabel*

whisperviolin: Marcel Wanders and Bas Maas

### **Notes about MUTED**

“I’m going to write you a piece so soft, I don’t care if no one can hear it.”

— *Michael Gordon, on learning that Monica would have to protect her hearing by stopping or adapting how she played the violin*

MUTED — a collective composition by Michael Gordon, Julia Wolfe, David Lang, and Louis Andriessen — features violin, voice, whisperviolin, frame violin, a multitude of mutes, and light design. Michael Gordon was joined by David Lang and Julia Wolfe in wanting to respond to Monica’s high sensitivity to sound by creating a piece that explores the limits of audibility. The three invited Louis Andriessen to join them in the experiment, fulfilling a long-held wish to collaborate. Floriaan Ganzevoort designed a light object, based on sound waves, controlled live in performance. MUTED is often described as “the quietest piece ever written for violin,” a description that certainly applies to parts of the work, although a contrast in audibility plays an essential role. Just as the pupils of the eye expand and contract in reaction to the amount of light in a space, different decibel levels play with sonic perception. A frame violin (ca. 1870) with a delicate, surprisingly overtone-rich sound is featured alongside the ingenious *whisperviolin* (2019), created by designer Marcel Wanders and luthier Bas Maas. Other instruments are paired with metal-tipped fingers or bespoke mutes from an ever-expanding collection of more than 400 vintage, modern, and newly commissioned mutes. Monica’s singing voice is heard in settings of texts from *Archy and Mehitabel*, a compilation of Don Marquis’s writings in his daily column, where they first appeared in 1916.

This intensely theatrical piece is conceived for small groups of listeners in intimate spaces. MUTED may represent four composers’ inspired response to a diagnosis, but it is also a reflection on silence and listening, an antidote to the noise and the ever-increasing clamor of today’s world.

There’s a passage from Igor Stravinsky’s *Poetics of Music*:

“My freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles. Whatever diminishes constraint diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one’s self of the chains that shackle the spirit.”

Limits inspire creativity. MUTED opens doors for a new voice. There is power in quietness; strength in speaking softly.

### **Acknowledgements**

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*Learn more about Monica Germino, MUTED, and the instruments and mutes used in this performance at [monicagermino.com/news/decibels-instruments-mutes-the-backstory](https://monicagermino.com/news/decibels-instruments-mutes-the-backstory)*

## MUTED

Text: from *Archy and Mehitabel* by Don Marquis (1878–1937)

We came into our room earlier than usual in the morning and discovered a gigantic cockroach jumping about upon the keys of the typewriter.

He would climb up on the framework of the machine and cast himself with all his force upon a key, head first, and his weight and the impact of the blow were just sufficient to operate the machine, one slow letter after another. He could not work the capital letters, and he had a great deal of difficulty operating the mechanism that shifts the paper so that a fresh line may be started. After about an hour of this frightfully difficult literary labor he fell to the floor, and we saw him creep feebly into a nest of poems which are always there in profusion.

Congratulating ourselves that we had left a sheet of paper in the machine the night before so that all this work had not been in vain, we made an examination and this is what we found:

*i was once a vers libre bard  
but i died and my soul went into the body of a cockroach  
it has given me a new outlook upon life  
i see things from the under side now*

*there is a cat here called mehitabel  
boss i have discovered that mehitabel's  
soul formerly inhabited a human also  
at least that is what mehitabel is claiming these days  
who were you mehitabel i asked her  
i was cleopatra once she said  
well i said  
i suppose you lived in a palace  
you bet she said  
and what lovely fish dinners we used to have  
and she licked her chops*

*this is the song of mehitabel  
of mehitabel the alley cat*

*as i wrote you before boss  
mehitabel is a believer  
in the pythagorean  
theory of the transmigration  
of the soul and she claims  
that formerly her spirit  
was incarnated in the body of cleopatra*

*i have my ups and downs  
but wotthehell wotthehell  
yesterday sceptres and crowns*

*fried oysters and velvet gowns  
i wake the world from sleep  
as i caper and sing and leap  
when i sing my wild free tune  
wotthehell wotthehell*

*cage me and i'd go frantic  
my life is so romantic  
capricious and corybantic  
and i'm toujours  
i'm toujours gai toujours gai*

*oh i should worry and fret  
death and i will coquette  
there is a dance in the old dame yet  
toujours gai toujours gai*

*I once was an innocent kit  
but a maltese cat came by  
with a come hither look in his eye  
and a song that soared to the sky  
and i followed adown the street  
the pad of his rhythmical feet  
wotthehell*

*my youth i shall never forget  
but there is nothing i regret*

## **Moth**

*i was talking to a moth  
the other evening  
he was trying to break into  
an electric light bulb  
and fry himself in the wires*

*why do you fellows  
pull this stunt i asked him  
because it is the conventional thing for moths or why  
if that had been an uncovered  
candle instead of an electric  
light bulb you would  
now be a small unsightly cinder  
have you no sense*

*plenty of it he answered  
but at times we get tired  
of using it  
we get bored with the routine  
and crave beauty  
and excitement  
fire is beautiful  
and we know that if we get  
too close it will kill us  
but what does that matter  
it is better to be happy  
for a moment  
and be burned up with beauty*

*than to live a long time  
and be bored all the while  
so we wad all our life up  
into one little roll  
and then we shoot the roll  
that is what life is for  
it is better to be a part of beauty  
for one instant and then cease to  
exist than to exist forever  
and never be a part of beauty  
our attitude toward life  
is come easy go easy  
we are like human beings  
used to be before they became  
too civilized to enjoy themselves*

*and before i could argue him  
out of his philosophy  
he went and immolated himself  
on a patent cigar lighter  
i do not agree with him  
myself i would rather have  
half the happiness and twice  
the longevity*

*but at the same time i wish  
there was something i wanted  
as badly as he wanted to fry himself*

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The great American humorist **Don Marquis** (1878–1937) was a journalist and columnist in New York City and the author of several novels, short-story collections, and plays. *Archy and Mehitabel* has become a celebrated part of the twentieth-century American literary canon. Marquis' best-known creation was Archy, a fictional cockroach who had been a free-verse poet in a previous life, and who supposedly left poems on Marquis's typewriter by jumping on the keys.

Marquis's satirical free-verse poems, which first appeared in his New York Post newspaper columns in 1916, revolve around the escapades of Archy, a philosophical cockroach who was a poet in a previous life, and Mehitabel, a streetwise alley cat who claimed among other things that she was once Cleopatra. Reincarnated as the lowest creatures on the social scale, they prowl the rowdy streets of New York City and Archy records their experiences and observations on the boss's typewriter late at night. Archy's short, broken lines of type were explained away by the obvious (!) challenges of a cockroach trying to operate a typewriter.

Archy and Mehitabel are remembered as comic characters, but Don Marquis' light verse often served as a humorous outlet and thin veneer for blunt social criticism.