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Oakland composer, birds make beautiful music together

Jesse Hamlin November 5, 2018 Updated: November 9, 2018, 11:20 am



Berkeley composer Wendy Reid and Lulu the parrot will perform Reid's "Ambient Bird 433" with other musicians Saturday, Nov. 10, in Oakland's Frank Ogawa Plaza. Photo: Courtesy Wendy Reid

Lulu, the African gray parrot who collaborates with Berkeley composer **Wendy Reid**, is expected to be perched in her custom-made Plexiglas cage at 7 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 10, in Oakland's Frank Ogawa Plaza, performing Reid's "Ambient Bird 433" with musicians on all kinds of acoustic and electronic instruments.

Reid calls the piece "a bird chaconne," built on an ostinato that Lulu sang and Reid recorded. She notated little variations on the parrot's vocabulary of "clucks, whoos and whistles" for three improvising ensembles that each play a third of the hour-long work.

"It's an ambient piece, where sections of silence are just as important as the instrumental playing," says Reid, an experimentally minded artist who teaches composition at Mills College.

She had **John Cage** in mind when she titled the piece, which refers to the revered avant-garde composer's celebrated silent work, "4'33'."

The performance is being produced by Pro Arts, the Oakland nonprofit that's showing Reid's graphic "Tree Pieces" scores in its gallery. The concert will feature Lulu live, responding to the music and random urban sounds, in the company of humans playing off her taped patterns and voice.

Reid, a violinist who notated violin harmonics inspired by the parrot's riffs, opens the piece with the Bird Ensemble, performing with Lulu, vocalist **Aurora Josephson**, **Ron Heglin** on tuba and voice, and **Brenda Hutchinson** blowing a long metal tube like a didgeridoo. They will

be followed by the Mills Contemporary Performance Ensemble, which includes electric bassist **Rodrigo Barriga** and saxophonist **Matthew Wong**.

The final section features the Frog Pond Ensemble, a composer's group whose members include **Nancy Beckman** on shakuhachi flute; **Tom Bickley** on recorder and electronics; **John Bischoff** playing his laptop; **Maggi Payne** on flute, recorder and bird whistle; and **Brian Reinbolt** on tweet boxes. They will improvise freely on the sounds of Lulu, sent to them in advance.

"I'm not writing out those sounds. Each of the musicians will have to translate them on their own instruments," says the composer, who is also scheduled for a show at Mills College on Nov. 17, performing her "Lulu Variations 3" on a bill with works by Payne and others.

Unlike the late, great French composer **Olivier Messiaen**, Reid doesn't transcribe birdsong; she aims to combine instruments with the bird.

"I'm trying to lift Lulu up to the composer level. She's the composer and improviser in this piece," says Reid, who says she never ceases to be amazed by the beauty of birds and their intricate music.

Reid's other bird, Shooshoo, a blue Pacific parrotlet, will also be heard on tape during the Saturday performance, but not live.

"She's a tiny bird, and it makes me nervous. She can squeeze out of her cage," explains Reid, who describes Shooshoo's contribution as "a very high-pitched little melody. She did it, and then did again, a half-step higher. Then again a half-step higher. She's making some kind of music."

For more information, go to proartsgallery.org.