

## Flutist Nicole Mitchell looks into the future with 'Mandorla Awakening'

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### Howard Reich

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

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**E**veryone in jazz knows that former Chicagoan Nicole Mitchell stands among the most creative, innovative and technically accomplished flutists working today.

But perhaps only Mitchell devotees fully appreciate her passion for science fiction and her ongoing embrace of it in some of her larger works. Over the past several years, Mitchell has unveiled compositions contemplating visions of the future, and what may be one of the most daring of them will receive its world premiere Saturday night at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Presented as part of the [MCA's](#) tribute to this year's 50th anniversary of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), Mitchell's "Mandorla Awakening" will feature an expanded version of her long-running Black Earth Ensemble performing alongside Ulysses Jenkins' video and lighting displays.

Though the narrative course of this work won't be fully apparent until it's staged, "Mandorla Awakening" essentially explores what an alternative, futuristic society might look like, Mitchell says. Inspired by the writings of Riane Eisler and Octavia Butler, Mitchell's opus envisions a world in which our best instincts might prevail.

"What I was interested in is this simple concept: The idea of reaching for an alternative expression of humanity," says Mitchell.

"I kind of looked at (Butler's) work and how she expressed the contradiction of humanity, where we have all this enormous potential for creativity and innovation and lots of possibilities, but, at the same time, there's this destructive aspect of humanity that destroys the planet. We destroy each other.

"That's the contradiction of being human," adds Mitchell. "In this piece, I'm looking at this through the lens of Riane Eisler, who wrote this book, 'The Chalice and the Blade.' ... She re-examines history through the lens of two different societies, two different concepts of life that have taken turns in all the different cultures in the world."

By that Mitchell means that Eisler explored the duality of creative and oft-destructive societies. And in "Mandorla Awakening," the flutist aims to explore the potentially positive place where these two approaches might overlap.

Is it possible, in other words, that a culture that finds the sweet spot where advanced and primitive impulses intermingle could create a better world for humanity? Is it possible that humankind might stop repeating familiar patterns and evolve into something better?

"It's kind of an idealistic, utopian kind of thing: What would an advanced society look like that was in tune with nature?" asks Mitchell, in crystallizing the question that "Mandorla Awakening" asks.

"Because in reality, we have the earth and its cultures that are very in tune with nature, but they're considered still living in ancient ways and not up with the times of the 21st century. Then our culture – Western culture – which is very advanced scientifically, but not in tune with nature at all.

"These are the extremes. What if we put these two qualities together?"

Mitchell has decided to explore these thoughts in a work that has no script but, instead, tells its tale via Mitchell's instrumental score (with limited vocals) and Jenkins' visuals. How well Mitchell's concerns can be articulated in this way remains to be seen and heard, but certainly Mitchell does not embark on this endeavor without previous experience.

In 2010, she unveiled "Intergalactic Beings" (also at the MCA), an experimental tone poem inspired by Butler's fiction. And in 2007 she presented "Xenogenesis Suite: A Tribute to Octavia Butler," which she documented on a CD the following year.

But why does Mitchell, whose musical and literary interests range quite widely, keep circling back to science fiction?

Ever since childhood, she says, "I was just really turned on by the idea that you can go into this future, and you can create. ... We can reflect our reality, but we can also create alternative worlds.

"So that idea of creating alternative worlds through sound, through art, through writing, is really exciting to me, because that space of imagination allows us to change the reality that we're in. We can change our future, so science fiction is really a powerful medium."

A palpable optimism courses through Mitchell's comments and through her sci-fi-inspired works, and, in a way, even the sensuousness and lyric beauty of her flute playing convey a buoyancy of spirit. Mitchell acknowledges as much.

"I can't help it – I'm just an optimistic person, I've been criticized for it," says Mitchell, who regards "Mandorla" as a work in progress.

"I think there needs to be a balance. There is plenty of pessimism in the world. My real goal is to kind of give hope, or try to.

"But not with the idea that everything is OK. I know we have a lot trouble. There's a lot of things that are very challenging about this world."

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Mitchell believes, however, that optimism also deserves a chance to be heard, and she fears that children and young adults encounter it too rarely these days. Her quest is to bring that message of hope to them, above all.

"I see a lot of young people – they don't have a lot of imagination toward the positive," says Mitchell, a professor at the University of California at Irvine.

"A lot of the movies, the futuristic movies, tend to be dystopian. Young people are having trouble imagining anything else."

In "Mandorla Awakening," Mitchell believes, she'll offer another option.

And who could say no to that?

### **Nicole Mitchell's 'Mandorla Awakening'**

**When:** 7:30 p.m. Saturday

**Where:** Museum of Contemporary Art, 220 E. Chicago Ave.

**Tickets:** \$10-\$28; 312-397-4010 or [mcchicago.org](http://mcchicago.org)

#### **Also worth hearing**

**Nicholas Payton:** The brilliant trumpeter leads his trio. 8 and 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 4, 8 and 10 p.m. Sunday; at the Jazz Showcase, 806 S. Plymouth Court; \$30-\$45; 312-360-0234 or [jazzshowcase.com](http://jazzshowcase.com)

**Renee Baker:** Violinist-composer Baker presents a newly commissioned work, "Sunyata: Towards Absolute Emptiness." 7:30 p.m. Sunday at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 220 E. Chicago Ave.; \$10-\$28; 312-397-4010 or [mcchicago.org](http://mcchicago.org)

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