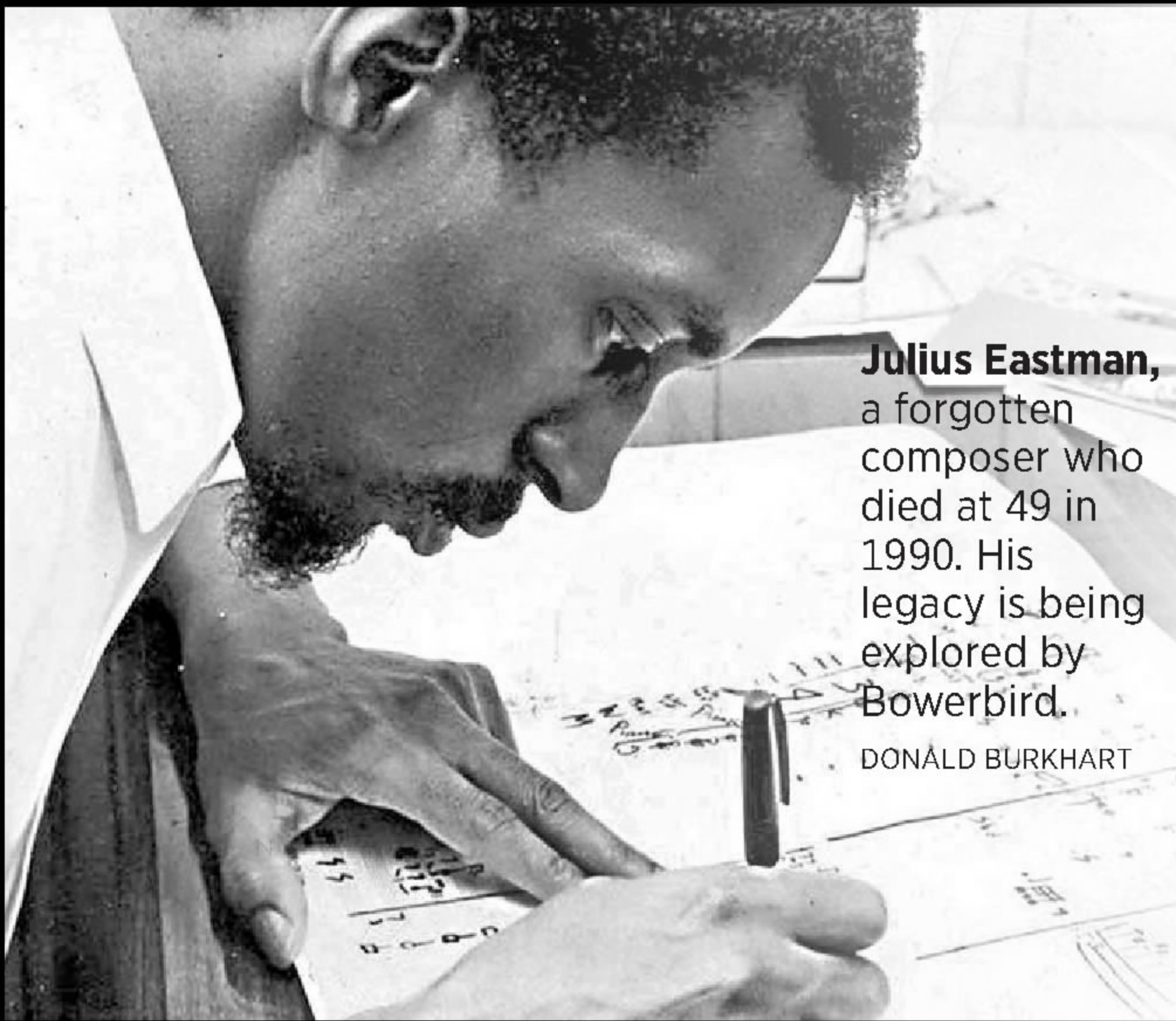




In search of Julius Eastman

Rediscovering work of the avant-garde composer and Curtis alum.

Julius Eastman,
a forgotten
composer who
died at 49 in
1990. His
legacy is being
explored by
Bowerbird.

DONALD BURKHART

By David Patrick Stearns
INQUIRER MUSIC CRITIC

Some composers don't slip into obscurity as much as their creative quest seemed always to have been the express route to oblivion.

The charismatic face and name of Julius Eastman, a confrontational, openly gay African American, kept appearing and reappearing to Bowerbird founder Dustin Hurt as he researched the 1970 avant-garde giants John Cage and Morton Feldman. Who
See **EASTMAN** on C2

MUSIC

► Julius Eastman: That Which Is Fundamental

Concert at 8 p.m. Friday at the Rotunda, 4014 Walnut St.
Panel at 7 p.m. Saturday at the Slough Foundation, 4017 Walnut St.

Admission: Free.

Information: www.bowerbird.org.

Eastman

Continued from C1

was this person who kept such esoteric company?

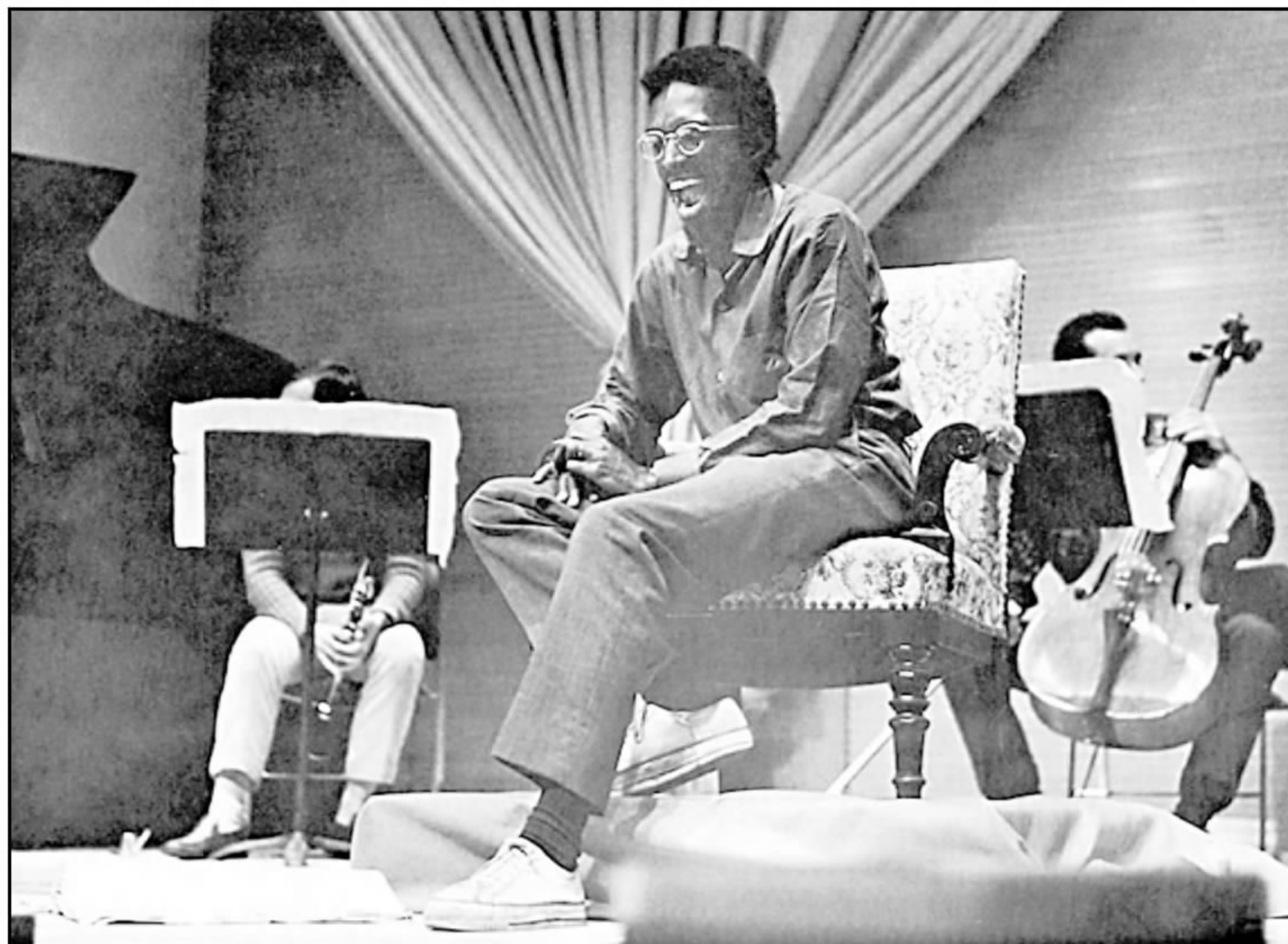
Now, Bowerbird is holding a pair of events dedicated to Eastman, with a concert Friday at the Rotunda and a panel Saturday at the Slought Foundation. It's time — interest in this forgotten experimental composer, who died in 1990 at 49, couldn't be in a more nascent state.

"There are a lot of aspects of his life and artistic output that have this outsiderish quality. But he also had this elite classical-music education at the Curtis Institute," said Hurt, who is testing the feasibility of a larger Eastman retrospective.

You can find Eastman performances on YouTube. In December, a collection of essays titled *Gay Guerrilla: Julius Eastman and His Music* will be published by the University of Rochester Press. Yet the challenges of bringing back his music are so singular that excavating centuries-old pieces might be easier.

In significant cases, a recording exists but a score does not. Transcribing the music onto a printable score — Hurt calls it "reverse engineering" — isn't just painstaking but possibly futile. Like many composers of that period, Eastman left certain elements (such as instrumentation) open to the needs of the performers.

Therefore, the basic idea of the piece can't necessarily be gleaned by how performers handled their particular circumstances. Scores that survived his apartment eviction during his last period in New York City are sometimes in enigmatic notation "that doesn't make any sense to me, and not to anyone



Julius Eastman singing. Two Bowerbird events explore the works and life of the experimental composer and Curtis alum. JIM TUTTLE

who reads music — until it's explained," says Hurt. "Luckily, we still have people who performed his music."

As it stands, Hurt says, only three of Eastman's 40-odd pieces are readily playable — and they happen to be the ones with provocative titles, some containing epithets that weren't printed on programs when Eastman was alive and that won't be at the Bowerbird events. Obviously, Eastman was trying to defang certain words by bringing them into the open in an alternative context.

Of one such word, Eastman said: "It has a basic-ness about it ... [and] eschews anything that's superficial or elegant."

One of his tamer titles was *Gay Guerrilla*, "because guerrilla glorifies gay," he said. "There aren't many gay guerrillas. I don't feel that gaydom has that kind of strength. ... A guerrilla is sacrificing his life for a point of view."

Was that what Eastman was doing in his life and art? His 1970s heyday was a time when

composers were reinventing music with near-scientific systems, but in more popular realms, composing was an outgrowth of one's personal evolution.

Eastman appears to have subscribed to both approaches almost from the beginning, when he started at the Curtis Institute in 1959. Having grown up in the brainy environs of Ithaca, N.Y., he was a multitheat, entering as a piano major studying under the esteemed Mieczyslaw Horszowski but also taking classical singing gigs and composing for his friends. And he was a gifted dancer.

Early on, according to Renee Levine Packer, editor of the *Gay Guerrilla* book, he was on record at Curtis as wanting to improve specific aspects of his musicianship. A bit later, though, his ultimate purpose was "to obtain wisdom." But he also picked up much else on the darker side of modern existence, and, as critic Kyle Gann put it, was "somehow torpedoing" financial security.

The biggest such torpedoing was at the University of Buffalo, where in the mid-1970s, he worked alongside Feldman and Lukas Foss, and had his works performed by the S.E.M. Ensemble, but grew increasingly bored with the low-level classes he was given to teach. His sexually charged performance in Cage's *Song Books* left the composer in a rage. Tenure was denied. His move to New York City was creatively stimulating, but so chaotic that he was, at times, homeless and living in Tompkins Square Park.

What exactly caused his downward spiral is disputed. He enjoyed partying in New York City's gay S&M scene. He failed to show up for work, even at the congenial Tower Records in the West Village. While singing a performance of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, he improvised his own aria. His company was so trying that when he drifted back to Buffalo only days before his death, old friends simply wouldn't let him in the door.

His death, brought on by depression, starvation, and any number of possible diseases, went unnoticed for months, even in the New York community that knew him. Yet his music has persisted, and what exists of it seems in step with many of the current European minimalists and Bang on a Can composers, with a repetitiveness that was called "merciless" in his own time, but that might now seem entrancing.

"You ask if he's important," says Hurt. "He did stuff that's way more interesting than a lot of people we know about." A somewhat noncommittal answer, but part of a discussion that's to be continued.