

Minimalist Composer Julius Eastman, Dead for 26 Years, Crashes the Canon

By Zachary Woolfe

Oct. 28, 2016

When Julius Eastman died in 1990, almost no one knew. It wasn't until an obituary appeared in *The Village Voice* eight months later that his friends and colleagues got the news.

"Most of his closest associates," the critic and musicologist Kyle Gann wrote in *The Voice*, "when I called them for confirmation, had heard nothing about it."

A composer of visionary power, a singer with a cavernous bass voice, a collaborator with the diverse likes of Meredith Monk and Pierre Boulez, Eastman had long been a fixture of the New York music scene. His sprawling, propulsive works had titles that ranged from the bluntly provocative ("Evil Nigger") to the winking ("If You're So Smart, Why Aren't You Rich?").

An archival recording of one of his finest pieces, the peculiarly spelled "Femenine," from 1974, was released last month on the Frozen Reeds label, and it shows what all the fuss was about. Ecstatically bustling, it's perhaps the most plainly beautiful thing Eastman wrote in a career spent challenging his audiences.

"What I am trying to achieve is to be what I am to the fullest," he said in a 1976 interview. "Black to the fullest, a musician to the fullest, a homosexual to the fullest."

Contemporary music has hardly been without significant black and queer artists. But the story of Minimalism, in particular, has been dominated by straight white men — La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass — and Eastman is a vital addition to their company, even if his take on the style was idiosyncratic and perhaps ahead of its time.



Julius Eastman, left, with the musicians Roberto Laneri, Jan Williams and Peter Kotik. Jim Tuttle/The University at Buffalo Music Library

But in his final years, he got caught up in drugs, or mental illness, or both. When he was evicted from his East Village apartment, many of his scores were scattered and lost. He drifted from his brother's home in Brooklyn to his mother's in Ithaca, N.Y., and back, and for a while, it seems, spent nights in Tompkins Square Park. Then, in a Buffalo hospital, he died; cardiac arrest was given as the official cause.

Declaring that Eastman's music "seethes with tension, hatred, triumph," Mr. Gann's obituary was for a long time pretty much the final word. Without extant scores, his works couldn't be performed; without commercial recordings, they could hardly be heard.

It was through the curiosity and persistence of Mary Jane Leach, a composer and performer who had worked with Eastman in the 1980s, that things began to change. Spreading the word, starting in the late 1990s, that she was looking for Eastmania, she became a clearinghouse for information, bits of scores and audio, and in 2005 helped organize the first commercial release of his work, a gripping three-disc, three-hour set called "Unjust Malaise," on New World Records.

In 2013, Jace Clayton, who often performs as DJ /rupture, released "The Julius Eastman Memory Depot," ruminative remixes of solo-piano takes on Eastman. Late last year, "Gay Guerrilla," a book of essays that takes its title from one of Eastman's pummeling signature works, was published; it includes the first substantial attempt to tell the story of his eventful, finally tragic life. In April, the American Contemporary Music Ensemble performed his intense "Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc" for 10 cellos (1981), whose dense score had disappeared but was newly transcribed by Clarice Jensen from the recording on "Unjust Malaise."

And now, for the first time, we're able to hear "Femenine," a longing, tender, grandly unruffled 70-minute masterpiece that takes its place at the pinnacle of the Eastman works that have survived. (Its companion, "Masculine," is one of many that are, at least so far as we know, completely lost.)

Eastman performances are burgeoning, including a concert planned for February at the Burchfield Penney Art Center in Buffalo, where he spent his most productive years. The Philadelphia new-music organization Bowerbird is in the midst of a multiyear Eastman retrospective and is planning a festival for May that the group hopes to repeat in New York next fall. Bowerbird is also working to create dependable editions of his most important works to avoid the errors that have crept into some recent performances.

Part of the pleasure of Eastman's rediscovery has been the belated, deserving reinsertion of a black, gay figure into music history. With additive, slowly transforming repetitions at the heart of his major pieces, Eastman has a clear connection to the Minimalist canon. But in the early 1970s, well before many others, he was using those repetitions as a structure to contain improvisation, as well as rhythms and harmonies borrowed from pop.

“Minimalism was still in its austere, two-dimensional phase, conceptual and concerned with abstract pattern,” Mr. Gann writes in “Gay Guerrilla,” “but in one step Eastman started mixing genres and forecasting techniques that would be tried in Post-Minimalism 15 years hence.”

Born in 1940, Eastman was raised by his mother in middle-class Ithaca. A gifted pianist from an early age, he started out as an accompanist for dance classes. After graduating from the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where he was a talented if restless student, he made his way to the new-music hotbed then flourishing around the State University of New York at Buffalo. There, the composer and conductor Lukas Foss, the influential music director of the Buffalo Philharmonic, had helped establish a vibrant system of artist residencies and concerts.

Buffalo and its resources gave Eastman the opportunity to experiment in works like the jazz-inflected, wailing “Thruway” (1970), an archival recording of which can be heard at the university's music library. (No video footage exists, alas, of what one review described as “the chorus walking through the audience as though blind.”) In “Trumpet” (1970), for seven high brass or wind instruments, a drone of stratospherically pitched dissonance gradually calms itself into shifting harmonies.

“Macle” (1971), the score and a recording of which are available at the library, is a riot. Influenced by John Cage, the score consists of large pages divided into squares of enigmatic instructions for the four vocalists: “Sharp stabbing sounds” and harsh daubs of ink in one box, for example; “Your favorite pop tune” in another.

In the recording, screams are interspersed with electronic buzzes and chants of “Take heart,” the work’s recurring, unofficial motto.

Eastman gradually moved from the chaos of those early pieces toward a kind of aggressive elegance. At the core of “Stay on It” (1973) is a bright, relentless riff over which a vocalist merrily sings the title. But improvised, wheezing, almost trippy passages emerge; the tight rhythmic order dissolves. When the opening riff returns, it’s slower and warmer, proceeding through chromatic transformations that are sometimes queasily dissonant, sometimes hopeful. By the end, there’s just a single piano playing, and, finally, the constant vibrating pulse of a tambourine.

The cover of a 2015 book of essays on Julius Eastman.

That tambourine effect returns in a big way in “Femenine,” the key element of which is a mechanized contraption, invented by Eastman, that shook a set of sleigh bells in an endless, wintry chugga-chugga. (Imagine if Morton Feldman — central to Buffalo’s new-music activities in Eastman’s day — had written an epic Christmas carol.)

A small, pearly ensemble twitters, pipes up, coils, sings and surges over the bells, as a piano provides a rich, mellow grounding. Around 45 minutes in, the piece gets to a genuinely blissed-out place, expansive and swirling.

The angelic quality of “Femenine” — not just quiet, peaceful angels, but the energetic, trumpeting kind, too — marked a climax in Eastman’s work. It was in the wake of his growing frustration with Buffalo and his subsequent move to New York City that Eastman wrote, in the late 1970s, a handful of forlorn, raging pieces, with incendiary titles.

Their pounding, extravagantly impassioned repetitions and rushing rapids of fury create a mood somehow simultaneously implacable and changeable. Eastman captures at once society’s dehumanizing coldness and the possibility of sustained, agile resistance to its strictures.

As the 1980s progressed, Eastman’s behavior grew more unreliable. He didn’t get a hoped-for faculty appointment at Cornell University and squabbled with his family in wake of a beloved grandmother’s death. He was said at some points to be living outdoors, at others in a homeless shelter. Gaining some steadiness, he worked for a few months in the late ’80s, at the Tower Records on Fourth Street and Broadway.

“Then one day,” Renée Levine Packer writes in her compassionate, cleareyed biographical essay in “Gay Guerrilla,” “he just didn’t return.”

The dissemination of Eastman's music remains a bit shaggy, with his estate controlled by his younger brother, Gerry, a jazz musician. In a phone interview, Gerry Eastman said that he had recently finalized his brother's posthumous membership in Ascap, the music-licensing agency. But after years spent trying to corral Julius's widely strewn output, he said he doubted a publisher would be interested in taking over that project and "investing those kinds of resources." For the time being, those interested in performing Eastman works must still negotiate terms, one by one, directly with him.

At least those terms may not be too burdensome. "If you're interested in playing this music, just call me and we'll talk," Gerry Eastman said. "I want the music to be heard, so I'm not going to be unreasonable."

A version of this article appears in print on , Section AR, Page 14 of the New York edition with the headline: A Composer 'to the Fullest' Enters the Canon