

JULIUS EASTMAN. MINIMAL MUSIC



Julius Eastman composing, c. 1969
Photo by Donald W. Burkhardt

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Curated by Eva Huttenlauch und Matthias Mühling

Julius Eastman (1940–1990) was a representative of Minimal Music. His rarely performed and challenging music is an impressive example of the international and cross-genre movement of Minimalism. The concerts at Lenbachhaus are intended as a musical complement to important works of Minimal Art in the museum's collection by artists such as Dan Flavin, Marcia Hafif, Rosemary Mayer, Robert Morris, Senga Nengudi, Charlotte Posenenske, and Richard Serra.

Eastman was appreciated by his contemporaries as a pianist and singer, but hardly recognized as a composer, although he collaborated with figures such as Pierre Boulez, Meredith Monk, Zubin Mehta and Morton Feldman. Although well known in professional circles, his work hardly penetrated the public sphere. His younger brother Gerry, himself a jazz musician, suspects that racist reservations in the world of classical music were responsible for the fact that Julius was largely ignored. A conflict between Eastman and the older, already established John Cage became known in 1975, when he accused Cage of not making his homosexuality a political issue and the center of his art; a condition that Cage explicitly rejected—but for Eastman was an essential part of his music. As an openly homosexual Black musician, he struggled throughout his life to assert himself in the musical avant-garde. Eastman's compositions were performed in the U.S. and in Europe, but did not enter the canon of New Music. When Eastman died, most of his scores were lost, and his music fell into oblivion. Thanks to dedicated reconstructions, especially by the composer Mary Jane Leach, his work was rediscovered and has been made internationally accessible. Most recently his works have been frequently performed, and become influential for young composers.

Eastman increased his resistance to everything established, to hierarchies and institutions through provocative work titles and statements, which were often rejected by the audience. Individual pieces by Eastman are important early testimonies to the thematization of racism and homophobia in our society. Already his original work titles confront us with this theme: *With Nigger Faggot** (1978), *Evil Nigger** (1979), *Crazy Nigger** (1979) or *Gay Guerrilla* (1979), Eastman addresses racist or homophobic themes consciously and directly, in order to leave no one the possibility to escape the reality of these discriminations. Analogous to the titles, Eastman developed an aesthetic-musical correspondence to the structural racisms of his time, which still exist today. The topicality of his compositions is a sad fact in this context, as he brings before our eyes and ears that even decades later we are still far from a language and society free of discrimination. The verbal violence of the work titles is therefore an unconditional part of Eastman's aesthetic work and these must be written out in the context of the performances so as not to jeopardize the integrity of his work and his intentions. The sentence of the writer and close confidant of Eastman, Nemo Hill, is revealing: „His categorial refusal to play by any rules he suspected of even the slightest

infraction of his core principles, his refusal to obey any authority other than that which he had identified in his own conscience as the Law—this program was carried out with all solemnity of a fullblown heresy against prevailing doctrine.“

The collection of the Blue Rider—a group of artists who championed the equality and mutual enlightenment of all the arts—has led to a programmatic focus at Lenbachhaus that combines visual art and music. We have been pursuing this consistently for several years with extraordinary projects. These include the first large-scale installation/performance by the Kraftwerk group in 2011, the *Playback Room* by Wolfgang Tillmans in 2016, the exhibition *Electric Ladyland* by Michaela Melián in 2016, the world premiere of *Symphony 80* by Ari Benjamin Meyers together with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra in 2017, the installation *White Circle* by raster-noton in 2018, and the world premiere of the ‘precarious musical comedy’ *Prekärotopia* by Beate Engl, Leonie Felle, and Franka Kaßner in 2019. Later in 2022 the sound installation *Spatial Jitter* by the electro duo Mouse on Mars will follow. Our supporting program is also repeatedly dedicated to musical themes, such as in our collaborations with the Bavarian State Opera.

Short Biography

Julius Eastman, born in New York City, grew up in Ithaca, New York, where he took piano lessons at Ithaca College at age 14. Composition and piano studies followed in 1959 at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. After making his concert debut as a pianist in 1966 at Town Hall in New York, Eastman moved to Buffalo. There he received a fellowship sponsored by the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts and taught at SUNY Buffalo beginning in the early 1970s. During this time, he composed numerous pieces for the S.E.M. Ensemble, which he and Petr Kotík founded. In 1973, Eastman created one of his key works, *Stay On It*, which is still considered one of the earliest examples of post-minimalist music that takes influences from pop music. In 1974 he created *Feminine* and *Masculine*. In 1975 Eastman's productive phase in Buffalo came to an end, and in 1976 he moved to New York, where he worked free-lance, and in a short time created several of his important compositions, such as the *Nigger Series**. There he collaborated with Meredith Monk and Arthur Russell, among others. Julius Eastman died of cardiac arrest in Buffalo on May 28, 1990, at the age of only 49, away from the musical public eye.

* This is the original title of the composer. Julius Eastman deliberately exposed the term as racist, drawing the attention of non-black people in particular to structural racism and verbal violence. We therefore decided to write out Eastman's original title in the context of the performance of his works.

FEMENINE (1974)

Eva Huttenlauch

Julius Eastman composed *Femenine* for winds, strings, piano, marimba/vibraphone, and sleigh bells. The score for the approximately 70-minute piece, which is only partially notated, comprises only five manuscript pages. It is an early example of Eastman's "organic music," in which each section of a composition basically contains all the information of the preceding sections, with the possibility of logical omissions. Thus he builds serial compositional structures according to the principle of repetition.

The entire work is based on only one melodic building block: a two-part theme on the vibraphone that emerges from a soft ringing of bells and that continues as a repeating musical figure for the entire duration of the piece. Bells and vibraphone form the musical skeleton of the piece. Gradually, other instruments join in to accumulate into a diverse sonic texture that grows denser layer by layer, with the piano providing the grounding voice. Eastman gives no time signature or tempo indication in the score, merely noting the length of time for each section, which gives the musicians a great deal of interpretive freedom. Clocks are used for timekeeping, and each musician can decide for himself which octave, which note from a particular chord to choose. Bar lines at most indicate phrases. On the other hand, there are also concrete instructions such as "The pianist will interrupt." The pianist also has a part that is not notated, in which the material played by the other musicians is picked up or supplemented. In the spirit of Minimalism, the greatest possible freedom and possibilities are brought out from sparsely notated material.

Femenine was composed during Julius Eastman's minimalist phase, which dates from about 1973 to 1981. As a groundbreaking composition, it does also contain references to Terry Riley's *In C* (1964), for example. However, Eastman's music is much more reluctant and deliberately brash, resisting a strict set of rules that had to be adhered to, especially in minimal music. The premiere of *Femenine* took place two years before Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* (1974–76). Eastman fused the strict dictates of beat-based serial minimalism with Jazz-influenced improvisation as well as Fluxus moments, using car horns in the premiere, for example—an ironic wink at the strict rhythmic structures of fellow minimalists such as Steve Reich and Philip Glass.

There is a recording of a performance of *Femenine* in Albany, New York from 1974 by the S.E.M. Ensemble and students from the University of Buffalo with Eastman himself at the piano. The story goes that Eastman insisted on serving soup during the performance, which he had prepared himself. The associated sounds can be heard clearly in the recording and are reminiscent of visual art happenings of the time. The convivial group spirit can be understood as an integral part of the piece. There are also accounts of Eastman wearing a dress during the performance. This can be seen in relation to the title, with which Eastman critically raises questions of gender and sexuality, and thus identity and normative constraints. This is because all minimal

composers included in the canon are male. His work *Masculine* (1974), the counterpart to *Femenine*, is one of numerous works whose score is lost. Among Eastman's conservative contemporaries, his titles, the concerto's informality, and his wearing of a dress certainly caused discomfort. It remains undisputed, however, that Eastman was always concerned with aesthetic issues, for example, when he says of the end of *Femenine*: "the end sounds like the angels opening up heaven... should we say euphoria?"

ABOUT THE MUSIC OF JULIUS EASTMAN

Isaac Jean-François

It is a treat to have the opportunity to share program notes for the Munich performances of works by Julius Eastman. A dynamic, black, queer, American composer, performer, vocalist, and ascetic eccentric, Eastman's extant body of work crosses the dimensions of classical, minimalist, jazz, and pop genres. Music and art, especially when near each other, are in constant communication. I can only imagine Eastman's sounds curling behind works of American Modern and Conceptual artists, like the electro-chromatic work of Dan Flavin and skin-stretching woven nylon tights of Senga Nengudi. Visual works by the Blue Rider, especially alongside figurations of the face by Alexej von Jawlensky, cohere transnational aesthetic questions about the body, emotional expression, and color. With these artistic images in mind, I ask: where is Julius Eastman positioned in his music? How does he face us—and with what does he face us? What questions about our own fragile presence in the world emerge out of his unsteady yet persistent archive?

Julius Eastman was born in New York City and soon after moved upstate to Ithaca, New York. He studied at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. He spent time on the Faculty at the University of Buffalo in the early 1970s. At this point, Eastman was a member of the S.E.M. Ensemble (now led by Petr Kotik in NYC) and the Creative Associates, both avant-garde performance groups of composers specifically interested in art music beyond Minimalism (as in, John Cage or Harold Budd). He traveled throughout Europe with colleagues of modernist sound, and we have a portion of that sonic adventure preserved in his 1980 Zurich concert recording. Eastman shifted between Buffalo and New York City at the end of his life, participating in Free Jazz and Gay House music scenes along the way. Eastman passed away in 1990.

A revival of his work has hit the mainstream in our present moment, in part, because of the pathbreaking scholarship of Ellie Hisama (now Dean of Music at the University of Toronto) who, in 2014, was the first to publish a long-form chapter about Eastman's sonic universe titled, "Diving into the Earth: the Musical Worlds of Julius Eastman" (in *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship*, edited by Olivia Bloechl, Melanie Lowe, and Jeffrey Kallberg).

This performance in Munich features works from the period in Eastman's life when his output was most significant. The concerts are all lyrical looks into Eastman's writing primarily for piano and strings, though the *Prelude's* hauntingly insistent writing for voice and *Femenine's* sonic thrust is held by vibraphone and sleigh bells. I cannot be too firm with the instrumentation, however, as many of Eastman's scores, including *Buddha*, are written for "unspecified instrumentation." This is a special feature of Eastman's oeuvre: contemporary performers are constantly invited to reinvent his artistic corpus.

Though I am not a musicologist, I appreciate reading the handwritten scores still available from Eastman's archive; after this performance, I encourage you to search for them online. In his 1979 "The Composer as Weakling" Eastman argues against the image of the isolated and distant composer. In this light, my engagement with the score as aesthetic object aims at shifting the immense weight of musical notation: scores vibrate on the register of the visual. So much of listening to Eastman is driven by a fundamental search for disparate parts of a larger unknowable whole and I have been inspired by the scholarship of Ellie Hisama to think with the fragments of sound and biography.

Femenine is one of the longest pieces in Eastman's extant archive of compositions. A presumed companion piece to the still-unrecovered *Masculine* (1974), its dazzling repetitive energy has been described akin to the work of Terry Riley's *In C* of 1964. Though the bells and vibraphone repeat the same phrase (which is no small task), there are so many points of entry for performers to jump in and add their own flavor; Eastman at one point notates "create new pattern." I learned from Chris McIntyre, Director and Co-Founder of TILT Brass based in Brooklyn that Eastman made his own music machines. The original sleigh bell sound was created by a noisy contraption of Eastman's own design.

Fugue No. 7, *Evil Nigger**, *Gay Guerrilla*, all works for piano, highlight some of his most spectral works. It would be curious to think about the latent texts that may oscillate behind Eastman's *Fugue No. 7* in the Early and Baroque music traditions, with examples in the work of Joseph Haydn and J. S. Bach. The crash of sound at various parts in *Fugue* adds an unsettling edge to the interwoven material. *Gay Guerrilla* and *Evil Nigger**, infamous for their hotly debated performance at Northwestern University in 1980, are some of the most militant pieces in Eastman's archive. I have written extensively about *Evil Nigger** elsewhere (*Current Musicology*, July 2020), yet I will emphasize that Eastman's interrogations of who and what gets to be included

within the classical-adjacent art music tradition (and some might even say canon) continues to be tested with these works for multiple pianos. These two works are like booming waves of sound with repetitive figures that recede and return with overwhelming intensity; could this be a sonic articulation of how race, and ongoing violence against minoritized subjects, iteratively manifests in the present?

Towards the end of his life, Eastman became an almost ascetic figure. His life offers no insight into a single spirito-religious disposition yet his sound continues to pour into a sort of ephemeral zone. *Prelude to the Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc*, for voice, *The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc*, first performed during Eastman's time at The Kitchen, in New York City, is a hauntingly insistent work. Composed in 1981, the piece's arrival is part of Eastman's striking collaboration with the Gay House music group Dinosaur L alongside with other work by Arthur Russell. "Speak boldly," are lyrics that emerge throughout the solo voice in the *Prelude*. *The Holy Presence*, for ten celli, drifts between a fugue-like layering of several phrases and the spine-freezing motif on an oncoming emergency vehicle. I hear the works playing with the imagined-distance between performers, everyday street sounds, and a layer-cake of earthy stringed instrumentation. *Buddha* is one of the last-known pieces that Eastman created. Written without a guiding key signature, its score features a large sketched image shaped like an egg on the manuscript paper. The piece blurs the boundary of score, loose experimental sketch, and curves the paper inward.

Listening to Julius Eastman is like being close to the water's edge; his music's cool reach brings objects, smells, and tactile sensations to your body that stick long after you hear it. Echoes of a quote from *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, edited by poet Essex Hemphill, swing into my thoughts about Eastman and his unfinished archive: "I also found our old beach ball, but I could not let the air out—his breath was in it" (Kenneth McCreary's "Remembrance"). So much breath remains within these sonic objects that stick to our frame and we must keep listening to these fugitive, unsettling, and dazzling sounds.

Isaac Jean-François is Ph.D. Student in African American and American Studies, Yale University.

FEBRUARY 8, 2022, 8 PM

FEMENINE (1974)

MUSICIANS OF THE MUNICH PHILHARMONIC

PIANO AND DIRECTION: MIGUEL PÉREZ IÑESTA

Bernhard Metz, violin / Theresa Kling, viola / Korbinian Bubenzer, violoncello

Michael Neumann, double bass / Bianca Fiorito, flute

Matthias Ambrosius, bass clarinet / Andreas Buschau, trumpet

Matthias Fischer, trombone / Jörg Hannabach, drums

March 5, 2022, 8 pm

Prelude to The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc (1981)

The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc (1981 / version for string orchestra)

Buddha (1984 / version for string orchestra by Philip Bartels, 2022)

Munich Chamber Orchestra

March 11 and 12, 2022, 8 pm

Fugue No. 7 (1983)

*Evil Nigger** (1979)

Gay Guerrilla (1979)

Kukuruz Quartett

Additional concert as part of the International Weeks Against Racism

March 14, 2022, 8 pm

Julia Amanda Perry (1924–1979), *Prelude* (1962)

Julius Eastman (1940–1990), *Prelude to the Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc* (1981)

Julius Eastman, *Piano 2* (1986)

Sofia Jernberg (*1983), *Improvisation* (2022)

Arnold Schönberg (1874–1951), *Die Kreuze* (1912)

Jessie Marino (*1984), *Slender Threads* (2020)

Julius Eastman, *Buddha* (1984)

Irene Higginbotham (1918–1988), *Good Morning Heartache* (1945)

Sofia Jernberg, vocals / Simone Keller, piano

All concerts take place in the Kunstbau of the Lenbachhaus.

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