



In Search of Julius Eastman

15 Dec 2016

Performers

Frederic Rzewski *Coming Together* (1971)

Julius Eastman *Femenine* (1974) (UK premiere)

Performers

Apartment House: Gavin Morrison (flute), Emma Williams (flute), Mira Benjamin (violin), Anton Lukoszevics (cello), Mark Knoop (keyboard), Kerry Yong (piano), Simon Limbrick (percussion)

Elaine Mitchener (Rzewski)

The bloodiest one-day encounter between Americans since the Civil War occurred in upstate New York on 13 September 1971. In response to a killing at a prison in California, around 1,000 inmates from Attica prison coordinated a mass uprising. Taking their guards hostage, the prisoners set out their demands: political rights, the removal of the prison superintendent and an end to appalling living conditions. During several days of negotiations, authorities agreed to many demands but not to an amnesty for the prison takeover. State police went in to take control, resulting in clashes that left 43 dead, including 33 inmates.

Attica was located only a few miles from the university in Buffalo where Julius Eastman was then based, and the events had galvanised the political mood on campus. The issue was racially charged too, with black and hispanic inmates forming the majority of the prison population. Though Eastman himself never wrote anything on the topic, he did take part in a performance at the prison three years later. He also enthusiastically took on the vocal role in Frederic Rzewski's *Coming Together* - a setting of extracts from the letters of murdered Attica inmate Sam Melville, that has

since become a classic of political minimalism. Underneath the vocalist's broad, declamatory flow, the ensemble unfolds one of Rzewski's trademark additive structures, the seething, shifting blocks of the first part giving way to a dreamy second.

Eastman probably first encountered Rzewski's music in 1970, when he performed the composer's *Les Moutons de Panurge* with the S.E.M Ensemble. Rzewski's musical language may have shaped Eastman's more than any other single composer: as Matthew Mendez suggests, "in Rzewski's hands, pulse-pattern minimalism was never rigidly non-referential. Unlike early Glass and Reich, the 'outside world' of politics and vernacular was readily embraced." For the cellist David Gibson, Rzewski's minimalism was an "aggressive and hard-nosed" counterpart to Eastman's "malleable and sensual" style.

If *Coming Together* is increasingly recognised as a landmark in minimalism, the same kind of attention is surely deserved by Eastman's long-form ensemble piece *Femenine*, composed during the height of his engagement with Rzewski's music. Underpinned throughout its 70 minutes by

the celestial chatter of sleigh bells, the piece is ultimately sustained by a single, beguiling motif - a stutter of repeated notes interrupted by an insistent rising step. Eastman's genius is to spin this into a kind of mantra, with woodwinds, strings and piano alternately cleaving to it and orbiting it as they cast about for the beyond.

Feminine was performed only a handful of times during Eastman's life, and rarely since. Like most of his mature output, it forces us to ask questions about the stability of musical works. No complete score survives, and may never even have existed: as so often, Eastman needed his players to improvise - albeit under his supervision. Given that little is known about how this worked, what are we left with? An early recording, released this year on the Frozen Reeds label, has been a catalyst for the current Eastman revival. A rough, incomplete performance guide also exists, but in such circumstances the ambition to recover a masterpiece must reckon with what has been lost.

Performers

Apartment House was created by the cellist Anton Lukoszevics in 1995. Under his direction it has become a venerable exponent of avant-garde and experimental music from around the world. Apartment House's performances have included many UK and world premieres of music by a wide variety of composers. The Apartment House group is of a flexible instrumentation, allowing for a vast range of performance possibilities. They are a regular feature on the European music scene and have even ventured as far as the USA and Australia. Their recordings and videos have been released on LMIC (George Mačiunas Musical Scoring Systems) and Another Timbre (Laurence Crane Chamber Works, Joseph Kudirka Chamber Works) among many others. In 2012 they received the Royal Philharmonic Award for Outstanding Contribution to Chamber Music and Song. Their double album of music by Laurence Crane has received critical acclaim - "compellingly beautiful" *The Guardian*. www.apartmenthouse.co.uk

Elaine Mitchener is a vocalist working in the area of movement art, noted for her unique melding of styles including sound poetry, free-improvisation, contemporary classical, gospel and jazz. She has worked with a range of leading creative artists including Irvine Arditti, Henry Grimes, Deborah Warner, Christian Marclay, Sonia Boyce, Heiner Goebbels, Tansy Davies, Phil Minton, Evan Parker, David Toop. Recent festival performances include: 56th Venice Biennale's Exquisite Cacophony, ULTIMA Contemporary Music Festival's Of Leonardo da Vinci (world premiere), Cheltenham

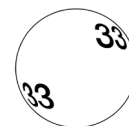
Jazz Festival, ENO (*Between Worlds*), National Theatre, White Cube, Café Oto, Vortex, La Dynamo (Paris), Whitechapel Gallery, Tate Modern/Britain, Weserburg MOMA (Bremen).

About Julius Eastman

Born in New York in 1940, Julius Eastman rose to prominence with searing performances of modernist vocal works such as Peter Maxwell Davies' *Eight Songs for a Mad King*. Embedded in the artistic world of Buffalo's Creative Associates programme in the early 1970s, his own music soon acquired a distinctive language based on a more organic approach to minimalism.

From the start, this approach was also imbued with the complex play of identity unfolding in Eastman's life and in 1970s America. On stage and in his social world, his insistence on addressing his own circumstances as a black, gay composer put him dramatically and increasingly at odds with his creative milieu. Through a long and gradual period of estrangement his compositions became occupied with intense oppositions - in which ecstasy and agony, the sacred and profane, the body and spirit fought it out. He gravitated towards the open and subversive possibilities of New York's downtown scene, but finally, jobless and evicted from his home, Eastman fell fully into obscurity: his death in 1990, aged 49, went unreported in the media for months. Led by the investigations of composer Mary Jane Leach, recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in Eastman, with recordings excavated and reissued and a volume of essays published in 2015. The present series forms part of an attempt to put live performance at the heart of that revival.

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