

FIRST PERFORMANCES

The Presence of Julius Eastman, London Contemporary Music Festival

For four years now, the London Contemporary Music Festival has been organising some of the most exciting new music events in town. In contrast to the eclectic extravaganzas of previous years, LCMF 2016 was tightly focused: three nights only, dedicated to the work of Julius Eastman. The programme was a revelation, even for those who are aware of Eastman and his music.

The legend of Eastman's erasure from recent history and later rediscovery threatens to overshadow his musical achievement. His life has become a sort of parable for others to moralise on fortunes of the misunderstood artist. Black, gay and 'difficult', he was left to slip through the cracks in American academia in the 1970s and by the mid-80s was sleeping rough in New York City; much of his work lost with his other possessions. He died in 1990, in almost total obscurity.

Since the turn of the century, Mary Jane Leach has led a quest to track down, salvage and revive what remains of his music. Most Eastman fans probably first heard of him through the 3-CD set *Unjust Malaise* that resulted from this hunt for recordings, released ten years ago. The recovery process continues today: this year Frozen Reeds issued a tape of the large-scale work *Feminine* that had lain dormant for 40 years. These recordings reclaimed a lost strand of minimal music that was never fully pursued: a unique, vital voice in a style of composition that had seemed exhausted.

These rediscovered tapes have obtained something of an aura of essential documents from a lost moment in time. There's always a nagging doubt behind 'discoveries' like this, that the story behind the art may be more interesting than the art itself. LCMF 2016 refuted this and established Eastman as a composer in a living history of music-making. By the end of the third concert, it had become abundantly clear that the records were just scratching the surface, both in what listeners know about Eastman's music and in how much more there is still to be revealed in his 'classics'.

Six pieces by Eastman were played, one of them a world premiere. The premiere was a work from 1984, *Hail Mary*, for voice and piano, and the piece is still unmentioned on Leach's list of known works. For perspective, Leach's essay from 2004 mentions that she had, at that time, obtained copies of scores for only two and a half works. When performed live by musicians who are not just skilled but are more sympathetic and knowledgeable than could be hoped for from a previous generation, the pieces took on a new life, with greater emotional depth and pure sensory delight than can be found in the old tapes.

In the first concert, Apartment House's performance of *Feminine* benefited from greater accuracy and confidence when compared with the previously mentioned recording, which in turn allowed its increasingly outrageous digressions to hit the audience with an almost overwhelming force. At first, the piece seems to be a cousin of Terry Riley's *In C*, with bright, short repeating figures set against a constant, pulsating background. Except the pulse is not a pulse at all: Eastman specified a set of mechanical sleigh-bells to constantly jingle throughout (a tape was used here). The bells were not in tune, or in time, and phased in and out of synch like cicadas. A percussionist was required to play a simplistic stop-start pattern on the vibraphone for the duration. These two fixed points never meshed with each other except, on occasion, in the subjective mind of the listener.

The rest of the ensemble played various figures that changed over time and the similarities with *In C* ended there. There was a curious sense of drama in the way that instruments would move from one figure to the next, sometimes together as a pack, at other times striking out individually or unexpectedly falling back. Figures were embellished and filled out with new harmonic and timbral colouring, much in the manner of Steve Reich's *Music For 18 Musicians*: a piece Reich might have just been starting work on at that time. For over an hour *Feminine* expanded, soared, self-sabotaged with mock heroics, turned in upon itself, recovered and ploughed on ahead, stronger than before.

The vibraphone became a yardstick, marking how far the band had travelled, harmonically and temporally. The constant bells seemed to rise and fall, sometimes screening the music and sometimes fading altogether, depending on where the listener's attention was focused.

Two thoughts came to mind. Like Dennis Johnson's *November* – another recently celebrated 'lost' work – *Femenine* brings together new ideas which would subsequently appear in other people's music. As well as foreshadowing Reich's later career, Eastman uses the distinctive techniques of early minimal music as a starting point, rather than an all-inclusive system. In this respect he could be the first post-minimalist, if one wished to pursue such a vulgar line of enquiry.

This led to the second thought. Throughout the festival, Eastman revealed himself to be an artist who refused to let himself be confined by the listener's expectations, or by the logic implied the foundations for each of his pieces. It's tempting to draw parallels with his life, but his music repeatedly shows a desire to rebel against its own constraints, never able to find a containing system in which it can find a balance. Never at ease with the structures that support him, he walked a knife-edge between destroying them and transcending them. Eastman's music is at its most powerful when these contrasting impulses combine to create the sense of a dramatic narrative unfolding for the listener, the meaning of which can never be fully resolved.

Apartment House's playing brought out these affecting qualities to full impact, possibly for the first time. Eastman spoke of wanting to bring popular music to the avant-garde, but until very recently it's been hard to hear that influence in the available recordings. The festival's finale, *Stay On It* sounded at last like a kindred work to the jazz and R&B Eastman spoke of. The piece's riffs and loops started out as bright and clear as any contemporaneous piece by Glass or Riley but then, in Apartment House's hands, became simultaneously looser yet more urgent, gaining an ever-greater sense of purpose as the musical argument threatened to lapse into chaos. In previous recordings, versions I've heard have sounded like a classic minimal composition derailed by an awkwardly sectional structure. At the LCMF it really did start to heave and glide from one idea to another, subverting its lock-groove origins and risking anarchy, as though in the knowledge that it's more fun to hang with Sun Ra than Steve Reich.

As the pianist Philip Thomas said afterwards, 'Julius Eastman's music is music to be performed, heard, experienced and understood via

the particular energies of live performance nothing much to hold on to but everything to play with. So much revealed in the playing'. It was the release of these energies and interactions that added a dimension to the music that most UK listeners hadn't experienced before. Special mention needs to go to vocalist Elaine Mitchener, whose free-form improvisation over *Stay On It* confidently set the tone for this performance and led the work into new territory.

Mitchener's voice also added a raw, disquieting edge to the otherwise softer and introspective later works, *Hail Mary* and *Buddha*. Both written in the year after becoming homeless, it's impossible not to hear either as a penitent cry for redemption. *Hail Mary* is spiritual music at its starkest, the Rosary and its prayer repeated in a voice seeking strength through anguish, set against a slow, descending line of single notes on a piano. *Buddha* is more subtle and mysterious, a rite of exchanges between the keys and strings of two pianos, searching for quiescence.

Two of Eastman's monumental works for multiple pianos, *Evil Nigger* and *Gay Guerilla*, were performed in arrangements for two pianos eight hands. The quartet of pianists (Zubin Kanga, Rolf Hind, Siwan Rhys, Eliza McCarthy) played with a brilliant clarity that illuminated the finer details and gave an overall sense of shape to what can often be a sprawl of multi-piano textures. Again, a sense of narrative was prevalent. In each piece, a seemingly straightforward process is at work before being subverted by dramatic twists and unexpected turns. In *Evil Nigger*, aggressively repeated phrases echo and shorten, surging again before suddenly dropping notes until all the voices have subsided into stillness. The mood is all at once angry, elegiac, triumphant and defiant. *Gay Guerilla* manages to be even more troubling in its ambiguity. A repeated rhythm nags away, develops into more sophisticated variations before coalescing again into a thunderous recapitulation. When it seems to have reached a conclusion, a new process imposes itself and the piece is overwhelmed with endlessly rising scales, as though an external force outside the composer's control has taken over. It's a sensation that's both glorious and disturbing, especially as it finally attenuates into the same nagging figure with which the piece began.

Other composers featured at LCMF gave context to Eastman's work. Other than Elaine Mitchener's performance from Cage's *Song Books* (a nod to Eastman's notorious interpretation which introduced sexuality to Cage's conspicuously chaste aesthetic) there were works

by Arthur Russell and Frederic Rzewski. Russell and Eastman were collaborators and kindred spirits of sorts, both outsiders to 'serious' (i.e. unengaged) music. Russell's almost inaccessible *Tower of Meaning* received an all-too-rare airing, in a special chamber arrangement from Apartment House. Its lack of direction, to the point of stasis, and its otherworldly blankness invites comparisons to medieval music, to Satie's *Socrate* and Cage's *Cheap Imitation* of it, as well as anticipating much 'naïve' music of the late twentieth Century.

The entire programme opened with Rzewski's *Coming Together*, a key work in understanding Eastman's musical approach – minimal rhythms, harmonies and repetitions as a framework for looser improvisation – and his engagement with politics, revolution and their conflicts with his sexuality. These themes were pursued further on the second night when Rzewski himself performed his own *De Profundis*, a setting of Oscar Wilde's text for reciting pianist. Besides the Eastman, this was the highlight of the Festival. Rzewski, now 78, may have faltered on occasion but his voice, playing and percussive gestures (including rapping on the piano lid, scratching himself, beating his skull with his fist) all spoke with an unmatched directness and clarity. It was a gripping performance, letting the words drive the music and the music serve the words.

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Impuls Festival, Graz. Collaboratory with Stefan Prins

Impuls, the International Ensemble and Composition Academy for Contemporary Music, has in the past offered a workshop that deviates from the main activities of instrumental classes and ensemble work, composition classes, lectures, and call-for-score reading sessions, taking the form of an intensive course which plays with the grey areas between composer and performer, performance and installation, cochlear and non-cochlear music. In 2017, with the Academy now in its tenth edition, the focus of this workshop moved from 'Composition Beyond Music', led in recent years by Peter Ablinger (2013) and by Georg Nussbaumer (2015), to 'Collaboratory', a new workshop led by Belgian composer/performer Stefan Prins, imagined in collaboration with Ute Pinter, the festival's secretary general.

Offered as a 'Special Course' within the Academy, applications were solicited from 'adventurous composer-performer-sound artists' who wished to develop their own projects while committing to an intensive course with collaboration as its central feature. Rather than signifying the collective creation of a single work, the collaborative element was instead intended as the way in which the members of the group would be encouraged to interact. To share not just physical space and equipment but also 'thoughts, energy, inspiration' was central to the three foci of Prins' 'laboratory': the development of each participant's own work-in-progress through feedback and discussions with the other participants; the preparation of a performance/presentation/installation of each work-in-progress for a final public event; the collaborative development and curation/dramaturgy of this final event.

Group collaboration on individual projects, one of the principle aims of the workshop, came to life during the first two days through intensive roundtable discussions during which each participant presented their proposed performance or installation. The 13 selected composers-performers-sound artists (categories overlapping or not) gathered in the ESC Gallery in the centre of Graz, an open-plan, glassed-in aquarium with seven squared columns in the middle and swathes of grey curtains. The group feedback quickly evolved into an enthralling hydra of debates: three hours were spent on one of the projects alone as we delved into aesthetics, touched upon creative vulnerability, the historical weight of a sonic object, audience roles, performer responsibilities, cultural appropriation, transgression of performance spaces, and the multiplicity of realities. Prins sat back, attentively watching chaos spin itself out, occasionally stepping in to bring the discussions to a head. It proved to be a rapid way of getting to know each other, cutting out the *hors d'oeuvres* of small talk and getting straight to the meat of each project, respectfully disagreeing, at times interrupting, but mostly seeking to clarify the central idea embedded within often very divergent approaches and aesthetics. Our backgrounds were at least as diverse as the ten (11 including Prins) nationalities represented: performance, improvisation, circus, composition, programming, installations, 3D modelling, song-writing. The situation seemed like it must result either in a complete train wreck or push everyone towards excellence.

It was an intense confrontation with the creative process. The only prerequisite 'preparation'