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JULIUS EASTMAN'S GUERRILLA MINIMALISM

The composer, whose brazen and brilliant music was all but forgotten at century's end, is finally getting his due.



By Alex Ross

Minimalism, the last great scandal-making revolution in twentieth-century music, has become venerable. This season, Steve Reich and Philip Glass are being celebrated worldwide on the occasion of their eightieth birthdays. (Reich's was in October; Glass's is on January 31st.) Arvo Pärt, the auratic "mystic minimalist" from Estonia, received similar genuflections when he turned eighty, in 2015. Boxed sets have been issued, academic conferences organized, books published. Kyle Gann, Keith Potter, and Pwyll ap Siôn's "Ashgate Research Companion to Minimalist and Postminimalist Music," the most comprehensive treatment to date, covers everything from John Adams's "Harmonielehre" to the electronic drone pieces of Éliane Radigue.

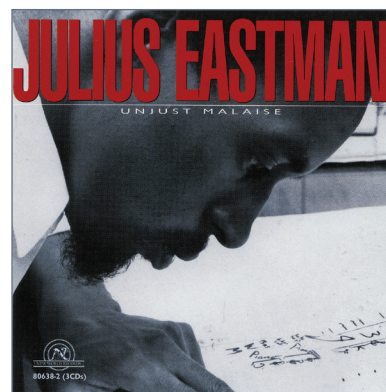
With the canonization of minimalism has come a reconsideration of its mythology. According to the familiar narrative, a group of composers led by Terry Riley, Reich, and Glass rejected modernist thorniness, opened themselves to pop and non-Western influences, and came home to simple chords and a steady pulse. The reality is more complicated. La Monte Young, whose String Trio of 1958 is widely held to be the starting point of minimalism, steered clear of tonality and maintained an avant-garde posture. A crucial rediscovery of recent years has been the work of Terry Jennings and Dennis Johnson, who joined Young in his early explorations of stripped-down textures. The pianist John Tilbury has made a luminous recording, for the Another Timbre label, of Jennings's early piano pieces, which are minimalist more in the Samuel Beckett sense—sparse, cryptic, suggestive. For the Irritable Hedgehog label, R. Andrew Lee has revived Johnson's vast 1959 work "November," in which crystalline sonorities gyrate for five hours.

The major revelation, though, has been the brazen and brilliant music of Julius Eastman, who was all but forgotten at century's end. Eastman found a degree of fame in the nineteen-seventies and early eighties, mainly as a singer: he performed the uproarious role of George III in Peter Maxwell Davies's "Eight Songs for a Mad King," in the company of Pierre Boulez, and toured with Meredith Monk. He achieved more limited notoriety for works that defiantly affirmed his identity as an African-American and as a gay man. (One was called "Nigger Faggot.") As the eighties went on, he slipped from view, his

behavior increasingly erratic. When he died, in 1990, at the age of forty-nine, months passed before Gann broke the news, in the *Village Voice*.

These days, Eastman's name is everywhere. Renée Levine Packer and Mary Jane Leach have edited an anthology of essays about him, entitled "Gay Guerrilla." A recording of Eastman's 1974 piece "Femenine," on the Frozen Reeds label, has won praise from classical and pop critics alike. The London Contemporary Music Festival staged three days of Eastman concerts in December;

Monday Evening Concerts, in Los Angeles, will present an Eastman program on January 23rd; and the Bowerbird ensemble, in Philadelphia, is planning a festival for the spring. Identity politics has probably played a role in the Eastman renaissance: programming a black, gay composer quells questions about diversity. But it's the music that commands attention: wild, grand, delirious, demonic, an uncontainable personality surging into sound.



"Gay Guerrilla" opens with an extended biographical essay, by Packer, that feels ready for adaptation as a harrowing indie film. Eastman grew up in Ithaca, New York, singing in boys' choirs and glee clubs. In his teenage years, he showed talent as a pianist, and in 1959 he began studying at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute, one of the country's leading music schools. There his interests shifted from piano to composition. By the end of the sixties, he had joined the Creative Associates program at the State University of New York at Buffalo, which, under the direction of Lukas Foss, had become a center of avant-garde activity.

Eastman first made his name as a creator of conceptual scores in the vein of John Cage, his incantatory baritone often serving as a connecting thread. In the same period, he acquired a taste for provocation. Cage was miffed when, during a rendition of his "Song Books," in Buffalo, Eastman invited a young man onstage and undressed him. This was not the kind of happening that Cage had in mind. Works in what Eastman called his "Nigger Series" began appearing in the late seventies, causing immediate discomfort. He might have made more headway if his tactics had been less confrontational, but,

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as a colleague remarked, self-promotion was alien to him. His final years had the aspect of a deliberate martyrdom, accelerated by alcohol and drugs. He spent time in homeless shelters and in Tompkins Square Park. The composer David Borden has suggested that Eastman was “teaching himself humility on his own terms.”

After Eastman’s death, his manuscripts were scattered, and some vanished. Only after years of detective work, led by Leach, has a corpus of scores been assembled. A three-disk set on the New World label, “Unjust Malaise” (Borden’s anagram of Eastman’s name), gives a superb overview. As it happens, Paul Tai, who runs New World, once hired Eastman to work at the old downtown Tower Records.

Minimalism enabled Eastman’s flowering, but, as Matthew Mendez writes, in “Gay Guerrilla,” his approach to the genre was “hard to pin down: arch, and not a little tongue in cheek.” In 1973, Eastman wrote “Stay on It,” which begins with a syncopated, relentlessly repeated riff and a falsetto cry of “Stay on it, stay on it.” There’s a hint of disco in the festive, propulsive sound. But more dissonant, unruly material intrudes, and several times the piece dissolves into beatless anarchy. (A good rendition can be found on the New World set; even better is a dynamic 1974 performance from Glasgow, available on Vimeo.) “Femenine” extends the mood of “Stay on It” to more than an hour’s duration, losing wit and variety in the process.

Eastman perfected his multifarious minimalism in three works of the late seventies: “Crazy Nigger,” “Evil Nigger,” and “Gay Guerrilla.” There’s a precious recording of the composer impishly discussing these pieces: in a dry, professorial tone, he says that he chose the word “nigger” because it represents “a basicness, a fundamentalness, and eschews that thing which is superficial or—what can we say?—elegant.” Each work is scored for multiple instruments of the same kind; Eastman usually presented them with a quartet of pianos. “Crazy Nigger” begins with a majestic rumbling

of B-flats in the bass. We are thrown into a world that is as much Romantic as minimalist: the harmony thickens incrementally; quiet episodes are juxtaposed with thunderous fortissimos; pentatonic interludes add an angelic sweetness. There is a sense of worlds forming, of forces gathering.

Classic minimalist works tend to introduce change by way of horizontal shifts: Reich’s “phasing” effect, in which instruments playing the same music slip out of synch with one another; Glass’s “additive” process, in which notes are added to a repeating pattern. Eastman’s method, by contrast, is vertical. He keeps piling on elements, so that an initially consonant texture turns discordant and competing rhythmic patterns build to a blur. New ideas appear out of nowhere: “Evil Nigger” becomes fixated on a minor-key figure, in falling fourths, that resembles the opening motif of Mahler’s First Symphony, and “Gay Guerrilla” hammers away at the Lutheran hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” beloved of Bach. Furthermore, players are given some freedom in realizing the score, their parts taking the form of structured improvisations. This exuberant chaos is far removed from the deadpan cool of Reich and Glass.



Eastman, all but forgotten at century’s end, is now seen as a brazen pioneer.

Throughout, Eastman upends the narrative of minimalist restoration—of the triumph of simplicity. Indeed, “Evil Nigger” runs the story in reverse, ending in spaced-out atonality. Surviving scores and recorded improvisations from his final decade revisit that zone frequently. (A tape of a volcanic 1980 piano-and-voice performance has surfaced; hopefully, it will be released.) Something about this music can’t be fixed in place, and recordings are a pale echo of the live experience. In the closing minutes of “Crazy Nigger,” additional pianists emerge from the audience and join the players onstage, to assist in the unfolding of a clangorous overtone series. The collapse of the wall between performers and onlookers feels like the start of an uprising. This is the point at which Eastman’s music becomes absolutely, ferociously political. For a moment, it seems poised to bring the system down.