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Rochester, NY, University of Rochester Press, 2015.

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- 1 As someone who first became interested in 'new' music as a student in the late 1980s, and has continued playing, studying, writing about and teaching music by composers variously considered to be minimalist, postminimalist and experimental (amongst other denominations), my first encounter with the music of Julius Eastman, in 2012, was exciting but also troubling. Exciting because this music grabbed me similarly, in certain respects, to now canonic minimalist pieces such as Reich's *Music for Eighteen Musicians*: the emergence of rhythmic grooves from sustained repetitive pulsation, the endless overtone variety from combined instrumental sonorities, the difference-within-repetition over a sustained timeframe, and the organic interdependency of harmony and rhythm all produce, for me, a deeply pleasurable intensity; a subjective absorption in nuance emerging from an objectified, openly inviting process. Exciting, too, because of the striking *differences* to those better known minimalist works: the noticeable differences in the development of musical ideas, in the ways players determine progression through the work, and in the harmonic language with, by turns, striking explorations of the harmonic series, octotonic structures, and echoes of jazz harmonies – a more 'ecstatic affect' than contemporaneous minimalism (as George E. Lewis has noted in his foreword to this volume, p. xv). Troubling, because it was hard to understand why I and many of my colleagues, whether performers, composers or musicologists, didn't already know this

music. Both exciting and troubling in the challenges the music presents: challenges for both performing and listening, but also through some of Eastman's titles. I wanted to work with my students on his music for multiple pianos, but how does a white, middle class English woman deal with presenting a piece called *Crazy Nigger* in the north of England in the early twenty-first century? How would this title be received, especially when audiences don't know anything about the composer or his music? But Eastman knew what he was doing. To be both delighted by this music and troubled by the questions it provokes is surely the point. To become absorbed in his musical world is necessarily to wonder why Eastman gained insufficient recognition in his lifetime, and hence to consider bigger questions about the relationship between the musical and the socio-cultural: between musical styles, practices, production, promotion and reception, and identity, race and sexuality.

- 2 *Gay Guerrilla: Julius Eastman and His Music* is the first book devoted to Eastman. Indeed, very little previous scholarship on Eastman exists: only in the last few years has that started to change. Even now, excepting a recent chapter by Ellie M. Hisama in the collection *Rethinking Difference in Musical Scholarship*,¹ almost everything on Eastman is written by those who also contribute to this book. Eastman's work deserves attention in itself and for its place in the development of minimalist, postminimalist and experimental composition, but also for its recalcitrance; its refusal to sit easily within any one musical style or the conventions of a practice, and its inseparability from issues of identity and culture.
- 3 Some of Eastman's work was traditionally notated, but he also worked with improvisation, and some of his compositions use systems of notation that provide an overall structure, indications of melodic figures and harmonic and rhythmic content, but not the full detail: often this was developed in rehearsal with players (sometimes with Eastman performing). Moreover, the circumstances of Eastman's increasingly chaotic life and his apparent disregard for possessions meant that scores, sketches and other forms of documentation were often lost, temporarily or permanently. All this, along with the sketchy recorded documentation of his work, means that performing or getting to hear Eastman's music is by no means straightforward. Where notations exist, it is not always clear how one should work with them. No wonder, then, that *Gay Guerrilla*, which takes its name from one of Eastman's compositions, entwines the personal, musical, social and cultural. The book considers his work as both a composer and performer, but refuses to separate this from his life and the contexts in which he lived and work. The necessity of this approach becomes increasingly apparent as one reads on. Some chapters are concerned primarily with biography, some are analytical or musicological, some a little of both, but each in different ways, whether explicitly or implicitly, confirms the interdependency of music, personality, environment and circumstance.
- 4 That Eastman's work is gradually being (re)discovered is very much down to the editors of this book, Renée Levine Packer and (especially) Mary Jane Leach. Packer was the same age as Eastman, who died aged forty-nine, and knew him during perhaps his most successful period of creative work, when they were both based at the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Buffalo was well known as a centre for new music, attracting composers and performers from all over the world, particularly through its Creative Associates Fellowship program. Eastman was awarded a Fellowship in 1969, joining the Creative Associates contemporary music group as both a singer and pianist and gaining opportunities to have his music performed, both

locally and on tour, including to Europe. He subsequently was appointed as an instructor at the University, teaching part-time while continuing to compose and perform with the Creative Associates and also with the S. E. M. Ensemble, set up by another Creative Associate, Czech flautist, conductor and composer Petr Kotik.

- 5 Packer sets out the fascinating biographical backdrop, from the poverty of Eastman's boyhood and his early piano lessons, his studies at Ithaca College and the Curtis Institute and his nascent singing career. Eastman was nearly 29 when he took up the Fellowship at Buffalo, supported by Lukas Foss (and Foss continued to be an important figure throughout Eastman's musical life: when Eastman moved back to New York, Foss, as conductor of the Brooklyn Philharmonia, not only programmed him as both soloist or composer but also gave him a part-time job as a co-curator and conductor in the orchestra's outreach programme. Packer explores Eastman's more controversial behaviour, including his apparently growing desire to shock, perhaps even alienate, friends, colleagues and audiences alike, and the impact of his later, growing drug use. As such, she relates some of the more notable moments in Eastman's career, including the attention gained early on by his performances as King George III in Peter Maxwell Davies's music theatre piece, *Eight Songs for Mad King*, and a controversial contribution to a performance of Cage's *Song Books* that angered the composer, due to its sexual content. However, Packer carefully places these in context, noting the ways in which Eastman moved between the white, middle class context of the Buffalo experimental music world and the local community of jazz musicians, where he often played alongside his brother, Jerry. Packer also sets out the circumstances and impact of Eastman losing his teaching position at Buffalo, considering the racial context alongside evidence of Eastman's unreliability (and the possible relationship between the two), before documenting his apparently sudden move to New York City 1976, where he mostly lived for the rest of his increasingly turbulent life. In his final years he stayed in no one place for very long, moving between New York, Ithaca and Buffalo with, towards the end, periods of homelessness. He died in 1990, not yet fifty. By that time, many of his friends and musical collaborators had lost touch with him or had encountered him only sporadically over recent years, and his drug use and extreme behaviour had resulted in his possessions being scattered or lost.
- 6 Packer's substantial contribution is supplemented by two shorter memoirs, by composer and jazz pianist David Borden, who was a friend of Eastman for many years, and R. Nemo Hill, a poet and novelist who was for some time Eastman's lover and housemate. There is occasional repetition here and throughout the book – some of the more notable incidents from Eastman's life are described by more than one contributor – but there is always a difference of emphasis or context, and this serves the overall narrative, confirming the difficulty of pinning down a life (any life, but perhaps especially this one). Borden's piece ends with an important, open question about the extent to which Eastman's life and work was conditioned by the impossibility of 'finding a home' as a black, openly gay composer-performer. Nemo Hill's chapter is disarmingly open about his life and sexual relationship with Eastman, and it is his refutation of the divorcing of work from life that is most convincing: he argues that lamenting Eastman's early death as a 'waste of talent', or wondering 'what might have been', given his potential as a composer, is misconceived: Eastman's music simply would not have been anything like it was in the first place with a different life.

- 7 Luciano Chessa extends this: his consideration of the queer thematics of Eastman's works involves reading *Gay Guerrilla* (the piece) as articulating, through its elements of chorale fantasia structuring and referencing of the Lutheran chorale *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*, a musical narrative predicated on Eastman's notion of a guerrilla: someone who sacrifices their life for a principled point of view. Perhaps more far-reaching is Nemo-Hill's contention that what matters is the use to which Eastman put the circumstances of his life; the ways in which this fed the artistic manifestation of what he called 'fundamentalness' and 'basicness', characteristics that he tied up in his use of the word 'nigger', since, as he explained to the audience at Northwestern University in 1980, 'field niggers' were the basis of America's economic success. In compositional terms, then, 'that which is fundamental', or 'organicness', is what matters: the work to which he put the basic materials of a piece within a structure that is both repetitive and grows organically. But George Lewis's foreword provides the stronger context and the one that exposes the impossibility of a purely structural reading: Lewis notes the connection not only to Richard Pryor's 1974 album *That Nigger's Crazy*, but to Malcolm X's distinction between the 'good' house nigger, and the 'bad' or 'evil' nigger – the 'field nigger' – who is out there, resistant, refusing to be put down. In many ways, this book explores the ways in which Eastman took up the 'bad nigger' persona musically and personally, in the sense articulated by Malcolm X and relayed by Lewis.
- 8 The three chapters that follow Packer's also stem from personal involvement with Eastman, but are less biographical. John Patrick Thomas outlines the significance of Eastman's career as a singer and Kyle Gann considers the distinctiveness of his compositions in the context of contemporaneous approaches to musical repetition, especially in minimalism. Retrospectively, Gann argues, it was as if Eastman could 'see into the future' of minimalism, a thread that is later picked up in Andrew Hanson-Dvoracek's contribution, a post-minimalist analysis of *Crazy Nigger*.
- 9 Mary Jane Leach, with her persistent tracking down of the traces of Eastman's work – scores (or sketches), notes from rehearsals, amateur recordings of performances, oral accounts of working with Eastman, and so on – is primarily, responsible for Eastman's music rising from the dead (as Gann puts it). Her initial compositional interest in pieces for multiples of instruments grew into a much bigger project: Leach started to collate relevant resources on a section of her website, piecing together bits and scraps of information, and the chapter is revealing with regard to the frustrations that arise in trying to persuade people to dig out old recordings, scores or instrumental parts, but also to rake through their memories. Reliability becomes a theme: the uncertainties of human recollection, but also the frailties of recording technologies (whether reel-to-reel tapes that need baking or damaged cassettes). Leach's perspective is at once that of a composer but also an archivist, albeit an accidental one, and in addition to her insightful commentary she provides as an appendix a list of Eastman's compositions plus additional relevant details, such as the availability or otherwise of scores and recordings.
- 10 Six further chapters offer musicological and analytical perspectives on Eastman's music. Some of this is analytical and/or practical in its orientation, exploring Eastman's musical language and structural organisation, but also how one goes about performing pieces that often exist only in summary notational form. Importantly, Mary Jane Leach's second chapter explores the full range of Eastman's compositional practice across the years, paying particular attention to his approach to instrumentation and key influences. Leach also draws on Eastman's short polemical essay, 'The Composer as Weakling', which

lamented the isolation and self-absorption of composers and urged them to get back involved in music making and in their communities. As a composer-performer, and someone involved in jazz and other forms of improvisation as well as classical music, Eastman lived what he preached (in this sense, at least). However, Matthew Mendez's account of the wide range of influences on and performance history of *Stay On It*, one of Eastman's best known pieces, notes the difficulties that arise precisely because Eastman's presence was so integral to playing this music. In choosing often to work without full notation and to develop the more detailed substance of pieces through rehearsal, according to the strengths of the particular players in the group, with structures that allowed for some variation between performances, not only is the work hard to reproduce at a later date, but also, as a result, the traces of the composer as composer are less defined, more easily erased. The weakling composer may be distant from musical practice, but in a culture of composition-as-writing, especially prior to ubiquitous cheap recording, his (still mostly 'his') scores facilitated resilience whereas Eastman risked disappearance.

- 11 While a number of the contributors point beyond minimalism and experimental music as the sole context for Eastman's work, noting the significance of jazz and improvisation, Ryan Dohoney's chapter widens the context further, situating Eastman's aesthetic of 'fundamentalness' in relation to the influence of punk and his involvement in experimental (often predominantly gay) disco culture, including with Arthur Russell's group Dinosaur L. Dohoney notes that this collaboration, combined with Eastman's experiences with experimental music and jazz, facilitated his development of the extended vocal and keyboard improvisations in which he more openly expressed his sexuality. Dohoney argues that Eastman's music undermines the simplistic categorisation of downtown, uptown and midtown New York cultures and the cultural association of certain groups of artists and/or practices with each, revealing important crossovers, sometimes arising at least in part from economic necessity. He also explores the relationship between experimental music, radical black activism and post-Stonewall gay sexuality in Eastman's work. This chapter opens up interesting questions about Eastman's music – many of which still cannot be answered, due to the absence of adequate documentary material – but also about the ways in which we form our histories of music. The disappointment is that the chapter is too short: despite the limited available sources for some of Eastman's work, the next, fascinating step would be to see the critical points brought into closer connection with the music.
- 12 Overall, *Gay Guerilla* is a book that explores unresolved questions: about Eastman's identity, his significance as a musician, and the politics of the relationship between the two. It is lively and engaging to read, but refuses to make the story simple: its strength lies in combining the dogged, determined work of putting together the pieces of a life and establishing a musical legacy, with a refusal to smooth over the cracks or to make pieces fit neatly into the available musical narratives.

NOTES

1. HISAMA Ellie M., “‘Diving into the earth’: the musical worlds of Julius Eastmann”, BLOECHL Olivie, LOWE Melanie & KALLBERG Jeffrey (eds), *Rethinking Difference in Musical Scholarship*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 260- 286.
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