Interview

Unnatural Invisibility

Elaine Mitchener on her new project "Moving Eastman"

Some composers are celebrated in their lifetimes. Others must wait for history to catch up. A composer faces a plethora of challenges throughout their career, from testing an edgy yet dubious idea or missing a crucial post-concert networking opportunity to simply submitting compositions on time. The odds of slipping into obscurity are extremely high. Add to that the misfortune of being dead—when luck is no longer on your side and your fate rests in the hands of others—and you might as well forget about it.

*Julius Eastman's **story** is one such case: a composer who faded into obscurity in the early 1980s due to adverse life circumstances that were compounded by his identity as a Black gay man working in contemporary music. Fortunately, his work has resurfaced and gained greater recognition in recent decades. Thanks to the efforts of Mary Jane Leach, who gathered and*

preserved his scores—left on the street during his eviction from his flat in New York City in the early '80s—we can still perform his works, now available via ***G. Schirmer****. There's been a broader acceptance of Eastman into the canon, marked by key milestones: from the first recorded release of his music, "****Unjust Malaise****," and the publication of Leach and Renee Levine-Packer's edited volume "****Gay Guerrilla: Julius Eastman and His Music****" to a major* ***three-day retrospective*** *at the London Contemporary Music Festival, performances by stars like* ***Devonté Hynes****, and his music's appearance at the BBC Proms in* ***2021*** *and* ***2024****.*

*Among those championing Eastman's music is British Afro-Caribbean vocalist, movement artist and composer Elaine Mitchener, who believes there is still more to be done to secure his legacy. Her new dance and sonic performance, "****Moving Eastman****," created with choreographer and director Dam Van Huynh, premieres in London at the Barbican in early April. The piece draws inspiration from the intersecting layers of Eastman's life. Like him, Mitchener channels a significant part of her creative energy into the overtly political nature of her art. Take, for instance, her 2018 project "****Sweet Tooth****," or her performance of Peter Maxwell Davies' "****Eight Songs for a Mad King****" at Wigmore Hall in 2023.*

Last week, Mitchener and I spoke on Zoom about her first encounter with Eastman's music, his unwavering commitment to art activism, that salty incident with John Cage, and the first steps in decolonizing contemporary and classical music canons.

VAN: Your admiration for Julius Eastman and his work is well known and goes back some time. When did you first come across his music, and when did you first perform it?

Elaine Mitchener: I encountered Julius Eastman at college but without knowing who he was. That would have been in the mid-to-late '90s when I was studying at Trinity College of Music. I heard a recording of [Peter Maxwell Davies'] "Eight Songs for a Mad King," saw his name, and thought his voice was extraordinary. But I didn't really look deeper into it. Then, a few years later, around the time "Unjust Malaise" came out, I realized who he was. Friends had been talking about him, and then we got the CD.

I was really excited to hear about a Black composer of contemporary new music, which felt very unusual. I was eager to hear his sound, and I must admit—I was underwhelmed. I think it was "Stay On It"—ironic given that I've gone on to perform it—that people kept talking about. So I thought, *Well, let's hear it*, and when I did, I thought, *Oh, this sounds a little bit twee. It's not as funky as I was hoping or imagining it could be.*

You obviously mean the interpretations of it, not the music itself?

Yes! And that's really important because, as performers, when we're given scores to interpret, there's a lot of responsibility in trying to communicate the composer's ideas. And if the composer is deceased, there's even more responsibility to bring the right energy to it. Now I can see what he was doing, but I had to mature musically as well as personally. In 2016, I was asked to perform "Stay On It" and [Frederic Rzewski's] "Coming Together" at the London Contemporary Music Festival's **retrospective of Eastman's work**. Normally, when I'm learning a new piece, I try not to listen to other performances because I don't want to be influenced. The one I knew from "Unjust Malaise" just didn't sound right to my ears. Instinctively, I thought, *This piece needs much more driving, seat-of-the-pants energy and more wildness. He wants improvisation. He wants us to lock in together and then have the flexibility and confidence to bring some kind of disorder into the music, and then lock back in.*

So I did some searching online and came across footage of him performing it with his ensemble [Creative Associates] in Glasgow in the early '70s when they were on tour. For me, that performance was electrifying because he was really driving it. I thought, *That's it!* My instincts were right.

And so, we performed it at the LCMF—it was very important to me personally. Since then, loads of people have performed it—wonderful artists of different generations with different approaches. It's interesting how we can reignite someone's career. Eastman was forgotten and marginalized, yet he was very much involved when he was alive. And that's why he was not a minor figure.

It's revealing that the first time you saw Eastman's name was in connection with "Eight Songs for a Mad King," a piece you later sang in May 2023, becoming the first woman to do so in the UK. Taking on such a historically significant work, especially one linked to Eastman's legacy, must have been a powerful experience.

Julius Eastman's is the most well-known studio recording of the work, but fellow Black American baritone William Pearson also recorded it and performed the role many times. Haleh Abghari was the first woman to sing the role. And in terms of people of color tackling it, I'm one of a growing number of vocalists who have taken it on. It's an honor to be part of the work's evolving legacy.

"Moving Eastman" was created with your long-time collaborator, choreographer and director Dam Van Huynh. It draws inspiration from Eastman's life—a story marked by both brilliance and tragedy. What led you to create a piece about him, and how did you and your collaborators approach shaping its material?

Dam and I have been working together for ten years, incorporating movement into my work. "Moving Eastman" feels very significant because it encapsulates everything we've been researching, talking about and trying out in various other works. Dam [originally] wanted to make another piece for me, a solo work. He said, *Look, I know you love Eastman*—that's where this concept comes from.

As a Vietnamese-American artist, Dam also has faced prejudice working as a contemporary avant-garde choreographer. He was responding to a quote by Mitsuye Yamada—feminist, poet, essayist and human rights activist—who, reflecting on her experience as a Japanese refugee in an American concentration camp just after the Second World War, said *Invisibility is not a natural state for anyone*. Dam wanted to use that as a starting point to talk about this idea of how people are considered to be invisible—because that isn't natural. We have this society that disappears people because they are not doing what they're supposed to be doing or they look a certain way. We also talked about who controls the historical narrative and who has the right to tell the stories.

Re-reading "Gay Guerrilla" helped me re-engage with Eastman's work and get to know the artist in a deeper, more complex way. But even in that book—which is a great book!—he struggles to be heard. Everyone is talking for him because he's not here to speak for himself. What we try to do with this piece is to unleash that, to allow his voice and ideas to shine through completely, and also to take a 360-degree view of the artist. He spoke about how he could be a dancer, a painter—any kind of artist if he so wished. He didn't want to be restricted or restrained, to be pigeonholed. And I find there are some parallels between what he was doing and what I try to do with my own work because I too don't like to be pigeonholed. Eastman had to navigate the world as a Black man, as a Black gay man, and as a Black gay man who works in the world of contemporary new music. He just wanted freedom to do it, but there is also a burden that was placed on him because of that.

Could you tell us a bit about the material in the performance itself? What is it based on?

Spoiler alert: There will be Eastman in there, but you'll have to wait to hear it. [*Laughs*.]

I had his ideas about music and form in mind: his use of repetition, for example. Expect minimalism—or post-minimalism. Expect improvisation and movement. My trio, **The Rolling Calf**, is performing as well—they're integrated throughout the piece. We've also created a soundscape working with sound artist Michael Picknett, infusing a cacophony of sounds. Working with Dam, we both never take the easy road in terms of creating work together. It's physically really demanding, and I think it will be physically demanding and challenging for those observing too. There will be no passive engagement.

It's been 20 years since "Unjust Malaise" came out and 10 years since *Gay Guerrilla: Julius Eastman and His Music* was published. What do you think are still the biggest misconceptions surrounding Eastman's name?

I don't know if they are misconceptions…

Maybe misconceptions is the wrong term. The narrative that his scores were lost on a sidewalk.

Well, those are facts. But he's not the only one whose scores were lost. George Lewis toured with him, and in 2018, when there was a focus on Eastman's work at [Berlin contemporary music festival] MaerzMusik, he was asked [that question] about Eastman. He said, *We were all young, we were all travelling about, and things got lost along the way*.

What this new project is trying to rebalance is how we choose to look at him—as an artist, as a composer. It's about not focusing on the negative aspects of life that he experienced, but drawing on the positivity and the joy that he had. He lived in a way that he chose to live—which didn't work for a lot of people—but he was very true to himself. He used art as activism, and he didn't shy away from that. He would be problematic now. If he was living in America today, saying what he said—his politics, his philosophy, his lifestyle—he would be targeted by the current administration. Not just in America, but in other parts of the world and Europe as well.

As such, your new performance feels very timely given the current historic and sociopolitical predicament. The world seems now less of an open-minded place than I had (naively) thought. It's important to remind audiences about people like Eastman.

I am just thinking about the libretto where I am quoting Eastman. He talks about a guerrilla being someone who sacrifices himself for a point of view. And he talks about really believing in what we do and believing in it wholeheartedly. I also quote Stuart Hall, bell hooks, Isaac Jean-François and John Coltrane. There's also a quote from Jenny Holzer: "The decadent and the powerful champion continuity. 'Nothing essential changes.' That is a myth. It will be refuted." That, for me, encapsulates everything: it's the continuity that serves the decadent and the powerful—it doesn't serve the greater good. Yes—it's right for these times.

On another note, how do you interpret John Cage's comments on Eastman's 1975 performance of his "Song Books"?

People are really fixated on that. It always comes up. I performed a few of Cage's "Song Books" myself. I think that, as a composer, when you write a work and it's given to a performer, it becomes open to interpretation. You may not like their approach. But maybe there was something else going on there. The fallout wasn't great—it wasn't great for Julius Eastman, I think. There's a lot of conjecture around it, so who knows? I prefer not to focus on that because Cage has had his dues, and his influence is so wide and far-reaching—but Eastman does too, in a different way. And I think there's room for different thoughts and approaches. Maybe Cage just didn't like what was happening—and you can't control that. I think it says more about Cage than it says about Eastman.

Speaking of control, over the past decade, the conversation about decolonizing the contemporary and classical music canons has become more central. Do you think progress is happening swiftly enough and in the right direction?

It depends on which country you're in. [In 2024 in Berlin,] I was part of the symposium "Always, Already There," which didn't include any work by Afrodiasporic composers who weren't alive. It was all living Afrodiasporic composers, which was a very powerful statement. It was also a statement to those who are programming, saying, *there are many more than you want to take on*. I just think it is lazy programming to only focus on those who are no longer with us—it is window dressing. It's not for us to do their job. If they are genuinely interested, then they will do the research and open it up.

People think that if you program some Julia Perry or Julius Eastman, it's done. But no—that does them a disservice because those composers were neglected in their time. They're being programed now, but living Afrodiasporic composers are still being ignored. Some ensembles are doing great work, actively programming diverse music because they love it and are doing the research. But there are many more that don't consider it important. This is not a matter of pace. Decolonizing Western classical and contemporary music canons can only truly happen when there is a complete overhaul of its institutions: education, concert halls, opera houses, and their administration—in effect, a root-and-branch decolonization of these spaces. If colleges aren't hiring a diverse professorship, then that's a problem. If opera houses and orchestral administration aren't diverse, then that's a problem. It goes from one level to the next.

Given all of this, what do you think the most important lesson to take from Julius Eastman's life and work is?

To walk the walk: that's the only way.¶

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