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THE ZÜRICH CONCERT

**JULIUS EASTMAN**

[1940-1990]

P I A N O

74:35

Recorded in concert October 25, 1980 in Zürich, Switzerland.

The concert was recorded on a cassette machine so there is a brief gap when the tape had to be turned over.

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**JULIUS EASTMAN**

THE ZÜRICH CONCERT

Just when you think you are grasping the breadth and quality of the music of Julius Eastman, a recording such as *Julius Eastman: The Zürich Concert* shows up in your inbox, and you have to go back and reassess his work and wonder what will show up next. This recording is from a 1980 solo seventy-minute improvisatory concert in Zürich, a cherished cassette made by a friend of Eastman's, who recently realized its uniqueness and decided that he should share it.

Since the 2005 New World release of Julius Eastman's *Unjust Malaise*, a 3-CD collection of archival recordings of Eastman's compositions that Paul Tai and I produced, information about and enthusiasm for Eastman's music has been accelerating. But who was he really? Until then Eastman (1940–90) was known primarily as the Grammy-nominated vocalist in Peter Maxwell Davies's 1973 recording of *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, which has one of the most virtuosic vocal parts in twentieth-century music. The CD set initially got a lot of notoriety, due to some of Eastman's provocative titles, such as *Crazy Nigger*, *Evil Nigger*, and *Gay Guerrilla*, something I naively hadn't anticipated, the titles being of the time (late 1970s), in the same vein as some of Richard Pryor's albums (*That Nigger's Crazy* and *Bicentennial Nigger*). Fortunately, those works are so strong that it didn't deter people from appreciating the quality of the music.

That appreciation also extended to not becoming distracted by Eastman's colorful life story, surely a movie-in-waiting. He was a larger than life figure in the arts world, a multi-talented, flamboyantly gay black man who was pushing the envelope, striving to fulfill his roles in life to the fullest, always with a flair for the dramatic. From a press release in 1980: "Eastman is something of a cult figure among composers and singers, particularly for his remarkable vocal range and facility which runs the full gamut from Russian Basso to Boy Soprano."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> From a press release written by The Kitchen for an April 30, 1980 concert at Environ.

Everyone who met him seems to have a colorful story about him, recounting some kind of outrageous behavior or incident. My first memory of him was at an early morning rehearsal in 1981 that he breezed into, wearing black leather and chains and drinking scotch. But he was more than just a colorful fringe character—he was not only a prominent member of New York's downtown music scene as a composer, conductor, and performer, but he also performed in such places as Lincoln Center with the New York Philharmonic and could also be heard in music played in discos. So it is ironic that with all of this prominence in a number of fields, that he and his music disappeared so suddenly and so thoroughly, falling through the cracks of collective memory.

Eastman was a polymath, excelling not only in the various disciplines of music, but was also a dancer and choreographer, as well as an occasional visual artist. And perhaps that is an explanation for his rapid disappearance once he died—everyone assumed he was part of another scene, that he was just "visiting" in their field, so he didn't have a dedicated constituency, compounded by his habit of alienating colleagues by being difficult to work with at times (even managing to anger the usually unflappable John Cage), as well as the hurdle of being a black man in a predominantly white field.

Raised in Ithaca, New York, Eastman was a paid chorister from an early age. He started studying piano at fourteen and was playing Beethoven after only six months of lessons. Although best known as a vocalist, he never formally studied voice. He went to Ithaca College for a year, and while there he began to accompany dance classes at the Iris Barbura Studio and subsequently began to study dance with Vergiu Cornea, a friend of Barbura's, who was a dance instructor at Ithaca College. He then transferred to the Curtis Institute of Music as a piano major, where he studied with Mieczyslaw Horszowski, but switched to composition with Constant Vaucrain in his second year, graduating in 1963. He also studied dance at the John Hines School of Dance at the Philadelphia Academy of Dance while he was attending Curtis. Some

of his compositions began to include dance while he was at Curtis. It's ironic that the one discipline he didn't study, voice, was the one he was best known for.

After graduation, he moved back to the Ithaca area, but not much is known about his activities for the next five years. He freelanced occasionally as a vocalist with ensembles in upstate New York, including singing a minor role in *Der Rosenkavalier* under the direction of Eugene Ormandy at the inaugural season (1966) of the Saratoga Performing Arts Center. If he was composing, there is no evidence of it, as in 1966 he gave two concerts of his music, one at Cornell University and the other in Town Hall in New York. He performed compositions that he had written while at Curtis and added an improvised piece, which got favorable reviews from both concerts. The only works that appear to have been written during this period are short pieces for solo piano (*Piano I-IV*) and a string quartet, although there is no score or recording for the string quartet.

In 1968 he moved to Buffalo, joining the thriving new-music scene there. This move proved stimulating, and he began to prosper, with increased performance and compositional opportunities open to him. He became a member of the Creative Associates at the University at Buffalo in 1969, which was a collective of composers and performers founded by Lukas Foss that basically functioned as an artists' colony, performing music by most of the important composers of that time, many of whom he was able to work with directly, as well as having his own work performed. Petr Kotik, a composer and flutist, moved to Buffalo later that year and went on to found the S.E.M. Ensemble in which Eastman performed and worked closely with until 1975. He also performed in jazz groups with his brother, Gerry, a guitarist and bass player who played in many jazz ensembles, including the Count Basie Orchestra.

Once Eastman was in Buffalo, his compositional palette gradually expanded from writing solo pieces that he primarily performed, to pieces for expanded instrumentation, using a combination of traditional notation, graphic notation, and improvisation, as well as other elements such as electronics and tape. During his time with the Creative Associates there were many performances of his

work, not only in Buffalo, but in Carnegie Recital Hall in New York, other East Coast venues, the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles, and in many European cities. Unlike with his earlier concerts, most of these performances were recorded and had good documentation, with programs and newspaper articles and reviews.

Eastman eventually moved to New York City in 1976. He started off slowly, with solo concerts, but quickly made connections and became absorbed into New York's various musical scenes, working with such luminaries as Lukas Foss and the Brooklyn Philharmonia, Pierre Boulez and the New York Philharmonic, Meredith Monk, Arthur Russell, and Peter Gordon. As in Buffalo, the new scene energized him, and he wrote some gems in a very short period of time: *Crazy Nigger*, *Evil Nigger*, *Gay Guerrilla*, and *The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc*.

Some highlights from 1980, the year *The Zürich Concert* was performed, include a concert at Northwestern University that had the premieres of *Crazy Nigger*, *Evil Nigger*, and *Gay Guerrilla*; a concert at The Kitchen; a solo concert at 33 Grand (Jeffrey Lohn's loft); recording Meredith Monk's *Dolmen Music*; performances of *Evil Nigger* and *Gay Guerrilla* at New Music America in Minneapolis; and a European tour sponsored by The Kitchen.

Three short years later, though, he had basically dropped out of the music scene. His final years were a life that had spiraled out of control, to the point that he was occasionally living in Tompkins Square Park in New York's East Village. His possessions, including music scores and recordings, had been confiscated by the City Sheriff when he was evicted from his apartment in late 1981 or early 1982, and he made no effort to reclaim them. And it was only ten years later that he died, alone, in a Buffalo hospital, his death unremarked upon by anyone for almost a year.

*The Zürich Concert* was performed on October 25, 1980 in the Aula Rämibühl gallery. Eastman was in Europe participating in The Kitchen tour, and a Swiss friend, Dieter Hall, a painter who had been living in the East Village,

arranged the concert. Hall recorded it on a cassette machine, so there is the inevitable gap when the tape had to be turned over, as Eastman played non-stop for seventy minutes.

Simply put, *The Zürich Concert* is a revelation. Granted, there had been hints of the power of Eastman's improvisational skills, but there was no documentation other than some reviews and word of mouth. "Improvisation" had shown up in various mentions of Eastman concerts, but what does that mean? Some of Eastman's works include some type of improvisation, from "anything goes" to a structured improvisation. In his early years at Buffalo, there were instructions such as to make "very nasty sounds" and sing "your favorite pop tune" (*Macle*) to the option of choosing the octave in which to play a note (numerous pieces), to Eastman performing un-notated improvisatory parts on piano, in pieces such as *Stay On It* and *Femenine*, that led and held the pieces together.

When he first moved to New York, Eastman performed a couple of solo concerts that were reviewed but not recorded. Tom Johnson wrote that "There are probably more composers-performers today than ever before. Many composers have had traditional performing skills, but people like Paganini and Rachmaninoff, whose music really depended on their performance abilities, have been rare.... But of course, there are also purely artistic reasons why musicians sometimes prefer to write for themselves instead of for other performers. In some cases composers really seem to find themselves once they begin looking inside their own voices and instruments, and come up with strong personal statements that never quite came through as long as they were creating music for others to play." He went on to note that Eastman played piano in a "high-energy, free-jazz style," and sang in a "crazed baritone."<sup>2</sup> Joseph Horowitz also noted that the singing was "often demonic."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Tom Johnson, "Julius Eastman and Daniel Goode: Composers Become Performers," *The Village Voice*, October 25, 1976.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Horowitz, "Julius Eastman Sings, Plays Piano at Environ," *The New York Times*, October 12, 1976.

Indeed, Eastman had written about the importance of being a performer and the role of improvisation, and as this recording proves, it wasn't just idle words.

If we look closely before 1750, we will notice that composer/instrumentalist were one and the same whether employed by the church, the aristocracy, or self-employed (Troubadors).

At the beginning of the age of virtuosity, beginning with the life of Paganini, we see the splitting of the egg into two parts, one part instrumentalist, one composer. At this time we also notice the rise of the solo performer, the ever increasing size of the orchestra, the ascendance of the conductor, and the recedence of the composer from active participation in the musical life of his community, into the role of the unattended queen bee, constantly birthing music in his lonely room, awaiting the knock of an instrumentalist, conductor, or lastly, an older composer who has gained some measure of power. These descending angels would not only have to knock, but would also have to open the door, because the composer had become so weak from his isolated and torpid condition. Finally, the composer would be borne aloft on the back of one of the three descendants, into a life of ecstasy, fame, and fortune.

This being the case, it is the composer's task to reassert him/herself as an active part of the musical community, because it was the composer who must reestablish himself as a vital part of the musical life of his/her community.

The composer is therefore enjoined to accomplish the following: she must establish himself as a major instrumentalist, he must not wait upon a descending being, and she must become an interpreter, not only of her own music and career, but also the music of her contemporaries, and give a fresh new view of the known and unknown classics.

Today's composer, because of his problematical historical inheritance, has become totally isolated and self-absorbed. Those composers who have gained some measure of success through isolation and self-absorption will find that outside of the loft door the state of the composer in general and their state in particular is still as ineffectual as ever. The composer must become the total musician, not only a composer. To be only a composer is not enough.<sup>4</sup>

The concert starts out sounding like Anton Webern, with that typical Second Viennese sound and sparseness, but it soon turns into cascades of sound, sounding more like Cecil Taylor (another polymath) with some of McCoy Tyner's left hand technique added in. There are hints of classical music, perhaps giving a tour of Central Europe, including sly references to the Tristan chord (Wagner had composed *Tristan und Isolde* in Zürich), totally transforming them. Eastman would occasionally sing a simple descending phrase, a kind of love song, but actually more like a love declaration: "I love you so much, my dear... You come naked alone, my dear..." The piano sound becomes orchestral, or more accurately it sounds like an opera orchestra, with the words sung sounding like bad translations of lyrics (or perhaps just a parody of opera lyrics in general).

<sup>4</sup> Julius Eastman, "The Composer as Weakling," *EAR Magazine*, Volume 5, Number 1, April/May 1979, (9th page—pages unnumbered).

There is no overall shape to the evening's performance, but it is more like scenes strung together. There are leitmotifs played on the piano that keep recurring, sounding clearly through the clouds of sound he was generating. At one point, during a pause in playing, the audience clapped, and it had that feeling that you get when someone claps between movements.

Listening to this recording, one is overwhelmed by the cascades of sound, the power of the playing. It almost seems as if the piano will start bouncing across the floor like an out-of-control washing machine. But there is also space and delicacy in the playing. As a whole, the music never flags, and your attention doesn't wane, as you are drawn in by the intensity of the playing and the coherence and wonder of the music being made.

Eastman was the embodiment of a composer/performer and I am grateful that Dieter Hall not only preserved the recording, but realized the value of what he had and shared it with the rest of us. Now I hope that more scores and recordings will be brought to light.

—Mary Jane Leach

*Mary Jane Leach is a composer whose work has been performed around the world. Her music can be heard on the New World, XI, Lovely Music, innova, Die Schachtel, Starkland, and Apostos labels. She co-edited Gay Guerrilla: Julius Eastman and His Music with Renée Levine Parker.*

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Francis Goelet (1926–1998), *In Memoriam*

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