

Composer of the month

3 Composer of the Week
is broadcast on Radio 3
at 12pm, Monday to

Friday. Programmes in July are:

28 June – 2 July **Britten**

5–9 July **Berlioz**

12–16 July **Falla**

19–23 July **Purcell**

26–30 July **Jennifer Higdon**

Eastman's style



Music for multiples
Several of Eastman's works are intended for any group of identical

instruments, with up to 18 players. The ensuing harmonic overtones (evident when the instruments slip into unison) are a key characteristic. Kukuruz Quartet have shown how well this music works for four pianos.

Organic music

'There is an attempt to make every section contain all the information of the previous section, or else take out information at a gradual and logical rate,' said Eastman of his harmonic language. He called this approach 'organic' music, a style that foreshadowed popular Minimalism.

Pluralism

By day, Eastman was a contemporary classical devotee, but at night he performed underground dance with Arthur Russell and jazz with his guitarist brother Gerry. His compositions reflect these disparate styles, with pieces such as *Stay On It* and *Feminine* featuring extended sections for improvisation.

Identity

Many of Eastman's titles reflect his struggles and satisfaction in being a black gay composer. Forty years later, pieces such as *Five Gay Songs* and *Joy Boy* are remembered as a powerful tribute to post-Stonewall New York, while references to his African-American identity continue to cause controversy.

Julius Eastman

A brilliant pianist, composer, singer and dancer, Eastman's wayward lifestyle hindered the success he merited, says *Claire Jackson*

ILLUSTRATION: MATT HERRING

Julius Eastman's music seethes and soothes; it caresses, charges and challenges. His varied compositions reveal the thrill and pain of being an outsider – many are testament to his intersecting identity. In an unusual triumvirate of talents, Eastman (1940–90) was a composer, musical performer and a dancer.

Primarily a pianist, he was frequently in demand as a singer for his intense, flexible baritone and dramatic (if unpredictable) stage presence. In 1970, he impressed internationally with his performance as King George III in Peter Maxwell Davies's music-theatre piece *Eight Songs*

While his music fell into obscurity during the late 20th century, in recent years there has been renewed interest in Eastman's life and career. *Gay Guerrilla: Julius Eastman and His Music* was published by the University of Rochester Press in 2015, and is an indispensable guide to understanding the composer's work. Awareness has also been increased thanks to recordings by enterprising labels, New World Records setting the ball rolling in 2005 with *Unjust Malaise*, a three-disc compilation of new and historic recordings. This was followed by the premiere release (on Frozen Reeds) of *Feminine*, alongside *Joy Boy*, both bristling

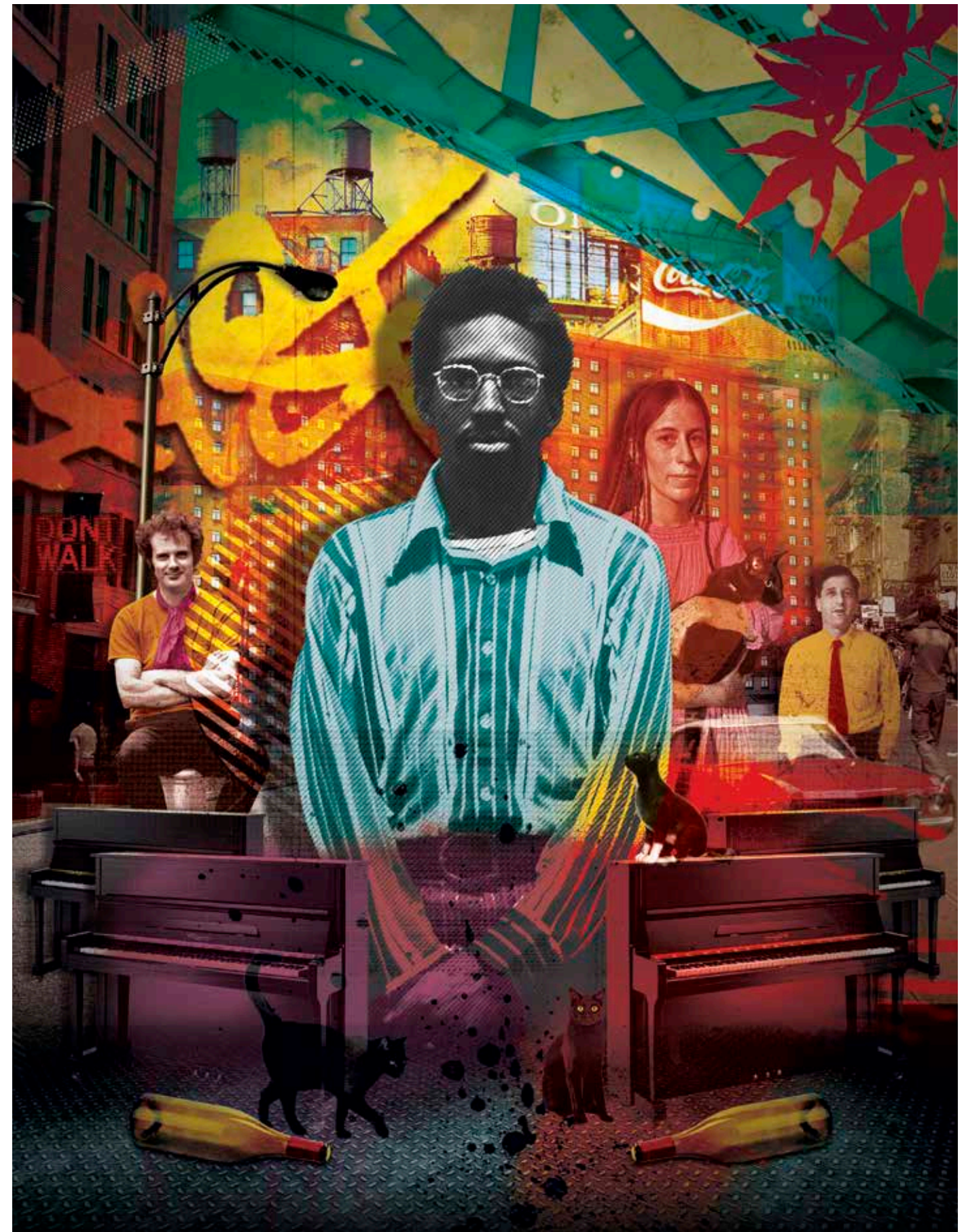
Eastman embraced his colour and sexuality in his compositions with raucous confidence

for a *Mad King*. He reprised the role several times, including with the New York Philharmonic under Pierre Boulez, and made a benchmark recording with Maxwell Davies himself. Around the same time, Eastman's own compositions were attracting critical acclaim. He joined the now-legendary Center for the Creative and Performing Arts at the University of Buffalo, whose alumni include the composers Frederic Rzewski, Terry Riley and George Crumb.

Just a few years later, Eastman's life had unravelled. Suffering from drink and drug addiction and living in a squatters' encampment in New York's East Village, he died, like so many composers before him, in the proverbial pauper's grave. The music world only learned about this through an obituary in the *Village Voice* published some eight months after his death.

performances from 1974 by the SEM Ensemble, with the composer on piano, which had lain hidden in the archives for decades. Meanwhile, ensembles such as the Kukuruz Quartet and Lutosławski Piano Duo have been touring Eastman's music, and the American experimentalist has been the focus of several broadcasts and events, including the 2016 London Contemporary Music Festival.

In a 1976 interview with *Buffalo Evening News*, Eastman clearly explained his *raison d'être*: 'What I am trying to achieve is to be what I am to the fullest – black to the fullest, a musician to the fullest, a homosexual to the fullest.' He embraced his colour and sexuality in his work with raucous confidence, frequently – and often intentionally – offending collaborators and audiences. Eastman openly satirised the complex intersectionality of his life, ▶



Avant-garde heyday: Julius Eastman (left) in the 1970s with members of the SEM Ensemble – Roberto Laneri (clarinet), Jan Williams (percussion) and Petr Kotik (flute and composer)

most notably in what he referred to as his 'N*gger' series of compositions.

In a spoken instruction to a 1980 performance at Northwestern University – given in lieu of a printed programme, due to complaints by faculty staff and students – Eastman gives a compelling defence of his titles *Evil N*gger* and *Crazy N*gger*. These pieces, alongside *Gay Guerrilla* (1979), *N*gger F*ggot* and *Dirty N*gger* (both 1978), use harmonic series in a similar way to early Glass and Reich, but with a much richer structure. As American critic and composer Kyle Gann writes, 'today his pieces sound particularly distinctive, as though he had not only absorbed minimalism, but could see into its future'. If the works had been given more generic titles (such as *Music in Twelve Parts, à la Glass*), it's likely they would be regular fixtures on streaming playlists where this genre thrives.

Eastman grew up in Ithaca, New York. His parents separated when he was a child and he lived with his mother, Frances, and brother, Gerald ('Gerry'). Frances noticed unusual behaviour in the infant Julius, who would repeat entire stories word-for-word from the age of two and was strongly independent. She also reports that as soon as he began piano lessons, it took considerable effort to prise him away from the instrument. By his teens, Eastman was good enough to accompany dance classes at the Iris Barbura Studio. Encouraged by staff, the young pianist began taking ballet lessons himself, eventually composing a ballet *Vergiu's Dance*, dedicated to the dance instructor Vergiu Cornea.

After an unsuccessful audition for Rosina Lhévinne (pianist Van Cliburn's teacher) at The Juilliard School, Eastman entered the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia on a full scholarship. The turning point in his career came in 1968, when composer Lukas Foss recruited him as a creative associate at the University of Buffalo, where he worked closely with Morton Feldman, Petr Kotik and others. He also taught for a period at the university where, although popular with some students, he was less than meticulous with time management, administration, teaching and most other essential skills needed to be a successful professor. His contract was not renewed.



Eastman's chamber group, the SEM Ensemble, were leaders in what we now recognise as avant-garde classical music. John Cage requested that the group perform his *Song Books* at the 1975 edition of June in Buffalo – the festival established by Feldman modelled on the Darmstadt Summer Course, the then epicentre of new music. By this point, Eastman himself

His participation in Cage's *Song Books* effectively cut his ties with the composer

had left SEM, but he agreed to return to the ensemble for the engagement. While Eastman's music may have been relegated to a footnote in musical history for several decades, his 1975 *Song Books* performance has long been the stuff of legend. (Kyle Gann writes that he was recently regaled with the Eastman-Cage anecdote by some students. When they had finished, he smiled and replied: 'Yeah, I was there'.)

The score for *Song Books* comprises 'instructions', graphics and conventional staff notation. All parts must be prepared individually without reference to other performers, so that the first time the solos come together is on stage. Eastman

interpreted the instruction 'give a lecture' to present an explicit talk about sex, undressing a man in front of the audience and attempting to do the same to a woman. Cage was furious. Yet one might point out that surely this is the very essence of chance performance. Eastman certainly thought so. Either way, the concert severed ties with Cage and many in the new music scene.

Over the next few years, Eastman's living conditions became increasingly precarious. Uninterested in possessions (both his or others'), he frequently left his apartment unlocked and was burgled. His uncompromising views, linked to his own brand of spirituality and non-conforming behaviour, made it difficult for people to support him. There are many painful accounts in *Gay Guerrilla* that illustrate this: from Eastman's refusal to lock the music room door in a community school that offered him use of a piano to wrapping a stray cat in a piece of textile art (that didn't belong to him) and smearing dirt over piano keys to improve traction (great for technique; terrible for the instrument).

His approach to professional engagements was equally radical. He once appeared, mid-performance, from behind his music stand with his face painted silver, much to the consternation of the surprised director. Another time, he walked on stage during a recital to whisper something to the pianist. Later, it transpired he had asked the soloist if he ▶

EASTMAN *Life & Times*

1940

LIFE: Julius Eastman is born in the town of Ithaca, New York, where he lives with his mother and younger brother. He shows a musical talent from a young age and sings in various choirs.

TIMES: *Tom and Jerry* make their debut in the animated short film *Puss Gets The Boot*. The pair are not referred to by name, however, until the following year.



An iconic role: Eastman rehearsing Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King* in 1970



1959

LIFE: He moves to Philadelphia to study at the Curtis Institute. Though he initially studies piano under *Mieczysław*

Horszowski, he later switches his attention to composition.

TIMES: Musicians Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and The Big Bopper are killed when the plane they are flying in *crashes in Iowa*, an event that later becomes known as 'The Day the Music Died'.



1966

LIFE: Soon after graduation, he makes his debut as a pianist at New York's Town Hall, playing Schubert, Ravel, Rameau and two of his own compositions.

TIMES: US president Lyndon B Johnson states his commitment to keeping a major American presence in Vietnam on the grounds of security. By April, around 250,000 US troops are in the country.

1973



LIFE: Eastman's recording of Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King* with the

ensemble on the Nonesuch label proves a major hit. He later tours the work with conductor *Pierre Boulez*.

TIMES: Building on the Sears Tower in Chicago reaches its highest point: at 1,450ft (442m), it exceeds the World Trade Center in New York as the world's tallest building.

1990

LIFE: Eastman dies on 28 May in Millard Fillmore Hospital, Buffalo, aged 49. The first public notice of his death does not appear until eight months later.

TIMES: On the orders of South African president FW de Clerk, Nelson Mandela is released from Victor Verster Prison near Cape Town, having spent more than 27 years behind bars.

1983

LIFE: When a hoped-for academic position at Cornell University fails to materialise, his life is increasingly overwhelmed by drink- and drug-related issues. He does, however, continue to perform.

TIMES: *Sally Ride* becomes the first ever American woman to go into space, flying on board the Space Shuttle *Challenger*. At 32, she is also the youngest ever US astronaut to do so.



would buy him a bottle of wine after the concert; rather than berate Eastman for the inappropriate timing, the kindly pianist made the purchase.

Eastman continued to compose when circumstances allowed. Manuscripts for many of his later works, such as *Symphony No. II*, are incomplete. It is suspected that scores may have been destroyed when he was evicted from his flat in the early 1980s. There was a brief period when he sought help, had some therapy sessions and got a job working at Tower Records. (It's highly likely he suffered from at least one mental illness but nothing was formally diagnosed or at least recorded.) One day, he didn't show up for his shift – with the exception of a couple of chance encounters, that was the last time anyone saw him. The official reason for his death was cardiac arrest. There was speculation that he may have had AIDS, which his family deny.

It is thanks to a small but dedicated group of musicians that we are beginning to piece together Eastman's back catalogue. In 1998, Mary Jane Leach looked for a copy of *The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc* to use in class as an example of a work for multiple instruments. Leach had attended the premiere of the work in 1981 and 'its energy and sound left a big impression'. Her search for a recording turned into a seemingly endless treasure hunt (Leach refers to herself as an 'accidental musicologist'), culminating in the first commercial recording release of Eastman's work – *Unjust Malaise*. It's thanks to Leach and collaborators that we have been given a second chance to reappraise Eastman's music – something that was too often denied to a composer of such bold, futuristic talents. 🎧