

78TH SEASON OF

CONCERTS

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART | SEPTEMBER 22, 2019



PROGRAM

Wild Up

Christopher Rountree, Music Director

September 22, 2019 / 3:30

West Building, West Garden Court

A Portrait: Julius Eastman

Julius Eastman (1940–1990)

Joy Boy (1974)

Femenine (1974)



Wild Up, photo ©Stephanie Berger

THE ENSEMBLE

We make music.

New music. Old music.

We'll play it, as long as we love it.

Wild Up

Wild Up is a modern music collective, an adventurous chamber orchestra, and a Los Angeles-based group of musicians committed to creating visceral, thought-provoking happenings. Wild Up believes that music is a catalyst for shared experiences, and that a concert venue is a place to challenge, excite, and ignite a community of listeners.

Wild Up has been called “Best in Classical Music 2015” and “a raucous, grungy, irresistibly exuberant...fun-loving, exceptionally virtuosic family” by Zachary Woolfe of the *New York Times*, “Searing. Penetrating. And thrilling,” by Fred Child of *Performance Today*, and “magnificent,” by Mark Swed of the *Los Angeles Times*. Over the past five years, Wild Up has collaborated with orchestras, rock bands, and cultural institutions around the world.

The group began in 2010 as a self-funded, completely bootstrapped project of Wild Up’s artistic director and conductor, Christopher Rountree. After graduate school, Rountree returned to Los Angeles wanting to create an ensemble made up of young musicians, a group that would reject classical music’s most outdated traditions and embrace unusual venues and programs that throw the classical repertoire into the context of pop culture, new music, and performance art. The group’s first few concerts at art studios and rock clubs around Los Angeles created a fervent fan base of true believers. Then UCLA’s Hammer Museum tapped Wild Up as the museum’s first-ever orchestra-in-residence. After dozens of concerts in the Hammer’s halls, courtyards, and galleries, the *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed the group “Best Classical Music of 2012.” It was off to the races, as Wild Up began working with musical and cultural institutions around the world.

The group has been ensemble-in-residence with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and played numerous programs with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, including the Phil’s Brooklyn, Minimalist Jukebox, and Next on Grand Festivals. The group started an ongoing education partnership with the Colburn School, taught Creativity and Consciousness at Bard’s Longy School, led composition classes with the American Composers Forum and American Composers Orchestra, and founded an intensive educational program with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, in which ten young composers and a faculty of eight legendary composers meet to collaborate on new work.

Most recently, Wild Up was ensemble-in-residence with Jennifer Koh and Shai Wosner at the Laguna Beach Music Festival and will premiere a few dozen new works, such as David Lang’s *Anatomy Theater* at the Los Angeles Opera. Wild Up made its New York debut on the American Composers Orchestra’s SONiC Festival with a program called *West*, which was selected as the *New York Times* “Best Classical Music 2015.”

Erin McKibben, flute and piccolo

Izzy Gleicher, flute and piccolo

Allen Fogle, horn

Mona Tian, violin

Linnea Powell, viola

Seth Parker Woods, cello

Derek Stein, cello

Shelley Washington, saxophone

Erin Rogers, saxophone

Jodie Landau, percussion and voice

Sidney Hopson, percussion

Jiji, guitar and bass guitar

Richard Valitutto, piano

Christopher Rountree

Christopher Rountree has distinguished himself as one of classical music’s most forward-thinking innovators in programming, conducting, and community building. Whether presenting his beloved chamber group Wild Up in a museum bathroom, or leading renowned ensembles through new music’s most exciting works at the world’s greatest concert halls, Rountree is the linchpin between orchestral music and the future of performance.

He is known for creating the renegade twenty-four-piece ensemble Wild Up in 2010. Now an institution in its own right, the success of Wild Up has led Rountree to collaborations with Björk, John Adams, David Lang, Scott Walker, La Monte Young, Mica Levi, Alison Knowles, Yuval Sharon, Sigourney Weaver, Ragnar Kjartansson, Ashley Fure, Missy Mazzoli, Ryoji Ikeda, Ted Hearne, and many of the planet’s greatest orchestras and ensembles including the Chicago Symphony, the San Francisco Symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Opera national de Paris, the Los Angeles Opera, the International Contemporary Ensemble, the Martha Graham Dance Company, and the Washington National Opera.

Rountree is a seventh-generation, California native descended from Santa Cruz County sheriffs. He lives in the Silver Lake neighborhood of Los Angeles.

PROGRAM NOTES

What is happening this afternoon would have been unthinkable twenty years ago. Even more remarkable is that events such as this one—a portrait concert celebrating and reveling in the obvious power of Julius Eastman’s singular music, which went virtually unperformed in the 1990s and 2000s—have been occurring more often in the past decade, all over the world. After Eastman died a quietly tragic death at the age of forty-nine in 1990, nearly twenty-five years went by where it seemed he was on his way to vanishing completely from the collective creative consciousness. Kyle Gann’s obituary in *The Village Voice*, contrite and elegiac in its belatedness, was published nine months later. But Eastman’s many idiosyncrasies as a creative person (not to mention his undeniably proud identity as an African-American effeminate gay in a world dominated by straight white male privilege) made his easy transition into the contemporary classical music record of posterity problematic. Thankfully the vitality and fecundity of Eastman—concert pianist of all repertoires, virtuoso opera singer, composer, actor, dancer, painter, and all-around creative polymath—is now being acknowledged for his crucial contributions to American art. His scores and related documentation are being recovered and preserved with increasing momentum and urgency. Most important, his work is being rediscovered, performed, and experienced by musicians and audiences all over the world. Because one doesn’t really *listen* to an Eastman work as much as one *experiences* it. The seismic shift Eastman caused in the canon of American experimentalism is finally being fully felt, an aftershock even greater than the initial quake of his already uncontrollable musical persona.

Call it what you will: archival fate, luck, or the too-late come-uppance of a stifled creative genius ahead of his time. Thanks to the exhaustive efforts initially spearheaded by Mary Jane Leach—composer, “accidental musicologist” (her term), and Eastman’s longtime friend and colleague—the works and legacy of Eastman are being gradually salvaged. The celebration of discoveries and recoveries is equaled only by the sobering reality that a good deal of the work is most likely irretrievably gone. There’s a score manuscript here, a concert recording there, but the majority of his sizeable oeuvre was literally scattered to the wind by the New York City police when they evicted him from his East Village apartment in early 1982, leading to years of homelessness and professional floundering. Ironically, Eastman’s personal-life rupture occurred amidst his most promising years: between the release of prominent recording projects featuring his abilities as keyboardist and singer with Meredith Monk (Dolmen Music) and Arthur Russell (*Dinosaur L’s 24→24 Music*), and one year after his notable composer-performer residency at Northwestern University, where three large-scale, proto-minimalist works for four grand pianos were composed and premiered: *Evil Nigger*, *Crazy Nigger*, and *Gay Guerrilla*.

If you already knew of Eastman before today, it was likely the direct or indirect result of hearing, or at least hearing about, that Northwestern University performance, via the live concert archival recordings from 1981, which was released in 2005 on New World Records as *Unjust Malaise*, a three-CD set alongside other landmark Eastman chamber works. The titles of these pieces and the inclusion of Eastman’s recorded prefatory remarks, where he patiently and sagely explains the language therein, have been oft-discussed, a sort of makeshift manifesto for a composer for whom the written and recorded record provides none. And while the arresting, polemical nature of these works’ titles is notable, the musical inventiveness and sheer audacity of the pieces’ creative power is equally compelling. Both from the audience’s perspective of sheer visceral experience (have you *heard* four pianists pound away for an hour straight?) and the analytical assessment of their carefully designed formal structures, Eastman’s signature style is on full display at the seeming height of his powers, deftly weaving improvisational, aleatoric, and minimalist/pop techniques into one monolithic arc.

The works on today’s program, *Joy Boy* and *Feminine*, were composed in 1974, a transitional year for Eastman in many respects, and they offer first glimpses into his creative approach arrived at by those piano pieces from 1981. He began incorporating large-scale, slowly shifting musical textures into what were once spare, enigmatic, and mercurial scores, sometimes employing pop-music idiomatic references (such as the disco-inflected exuberant riffs in *Stay On It*) and greater amounts of performer improvisation within controlled harmonic structures. Also, his titles grew increasingly uncompromising and provocative, centered on asserting his queer black identity, literally forcing the issue into the spotlight and, moreover, onto the printed program, poster, and marquee.

In the early ’70s, Eastman’s diverse compositional experiments could be summed up as pluralistic and avant-garde, churning out a wide variety of works that all fell under the umbrella of Euro-American experimentalism, in the vein of John Cage, Morton Feldman, and Earle Brown. This was during his few years of residency with the Creative Associates at SUNY-Buffalo (directed by Lukas Foss), as a performer and composer, which eventually ended abruptly in 1975 when Eastman moved to New York City. The decision to move could have been Eastman’s desire to seek divergent creative paths that spoke more to his interests in jazz improvisation, multidisciplinary theatricality, and a political activism sparked by the national news and uproar over the Attica prison riots. Or more salaciously, it could have been the result of a falling out with John Cage, after the venerable experimentalist publicly scolded Eastman for “misinterpreting” one of Cage’s more open-ended pieces from *Song Books*. Cage’s uncharacteristically angry act and the words he used (which were recorded at the time) are hard to read with our contemporary minds as anything other than thinly veiled racism and homonormative privilege, a rejection of Eastman’s blackness, queerness, and sheer

audacity in the mind of an “establishment experimentalist.” In American classical culture, even with its fair share of white gay men, Eastman’s ever-present bawdy queerness and eventually his overt political agenda were certainly not commonplace, especially when viewed against the quietly homosexual “mindfulness” persona of John Cage. From both on and off the stage, anecdotes from Eastman’s friends and collaborators consistently reveal a person who reveled in his queer identity, so comfortably that he often employed it as an awkward weapon of social subterfuge. By 1974, these politics of homoeroticism and gender-fluidity—formerly limited to and hidden within the abstract musical material itself via suggestive vocalizations, nontraditional playing techniques, and campy presentational aesthetic—had moved decidedly to the forefront of his compositions; personality metamorphosed to aesthetic.

Thanks to the Norwegian record label Frozen Reeds, we have live recordings of *Joy Boy* and *Feminine* with Eastman himself performing as singer and pianist, respectively. Evidence exists that the two pieces were often performed at the same concert, and that on more than one occasion Eastman performed in surreal drag attire (an act not limited to the performances of his own music!). The pieces collectively contribute to a re-mythologizing of gender beyond the contemporary heteronormative binary, where Eastman’s conflation of gender identities seems to be an intentional upending of traditional assumptions, in personal identity and cultural awareness. Both pieces have a fair amount of open-endedness, but their most tightly controlled element is pitch: performers are constrained to prescribed melodic or harmonic content at any given moment, but they are essentially improvising freely in terms of rhythm and note selection within that parameter (as well as simply whether to play at all). Beyond this compositional similarity, the overall scope and emotional affect of the works could not be more different: *Joy Boy* is brief, frenetic, mercurial, and borders on hilarity. The masculine has thus been recast as flighty, campy, unpredictable, and ephemeral. Instruments and duration for *Joy Boy* are not specified, with chord and small sectional changes cued by the performers ad lib, but the recording of Eastman’s performance with three other members of the SEM Ensemble has them singing in falsetto and playing woodwinds for about nine minutes. In contrast, the numerous expansive sections of *Feminine* are controlled by stopwatch timings, and the score takes at least sixty-three minutes to perform, depending on how long the final, open-ended section lasts. The persistent vibraphone motive—a thirteen-beat syncopated fanfare using only two pitches—is unchanging throughout. With a few exceptional dramatic moments, the piece exists entirely in E-flat major, mostly pentatonic, eschewing the leading tones which would make the music feel like it’s “going somewhere.” The melodic material changes very gradually: Eastman adds or subtracts a note or two, or changes/adds octaves every few minutes, and the rhythmic density increases or decreases often on the scale of *tens of minutes* at a time. In its first several minutes,

the music seems too self-same, almost monotonous, but the meditative profundity of *Feminine* is balanced and decorated by a constantly and freely improvising piano-part, and eventually the sum-total reveals lush, ecstatic textures where single tones seem to disappear into a rapturous harmonic ocean, wave after wave. This confident, tidal inexorability is later varied and anchored by calls-to-action from the piano and bass instruments, followed by blasted, dissonant, insistent responses from the full band. In contrast with the naive, youthful “masculine” of *Joy Boy*, the “feminine” now occupies its place as an eternal, grounded, creative force.

In 1979, Eastman published a pithy op-ed in *EAR Magazine*, “The Composer as Weakling.” In this exhortation to modern-day performers and composers alike, Eastman urges musicians to transcend the received hierarchy and narratives of Western art music and scolds them for their collective lapse into specialization and creative quarantining, with the brunt of his invective focused on the composer “birthing music in his lonely room.” While the male pronoun seemed to be used throughout for convention’s sake, in the final paragraphs, Eastman’s sexual politics and aesthetic ideals coalesce in a poetic conflation and alternation of gendered pronouns: “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...and give a fresh new view of the known and unknown classics.” While the specialist composer “he” is regarded as antiquated and weak, Eastman freely switches to “she” pronouns with the pronouncement of renewed vitality and relevance to the musical culture. Before it became a hashtag or a meme, it would seem that Eastman was already asserting: “The Future is Female.”

As an ensemble, Wild Up revels in opportunities to collaborate in multidisciplinary ways. Albeit posthumously, our collaboration with Eastman in this regard includes everything we love about contemporary classical musical practice. We are encouraged to bring to bear an exuberant abandon in unbridled spontaneous creativity. We grapple with a constantly evolving performance practice that includes styles and interpretive modes from the vast spectrum of modern day genres. And we are required to deeply consider the crucial intersectionality of Eastman’s musical legacy and the immediacy it carries with it, necessitating awareness and compassion concerning issues that have become even more increasingly relevant as we approach the third decade of our twenty-first-century world.

Program notes by Richard Valitutto, pianist



Edmond Lebel, *Still Life of Musical Instruments*, c. 1863, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Robert B. Menschel Fund

Upcoming Events of the Seventy-Eighth Season of The William Nelson Cromwell and F. Lammot Belin Concerts

Unless otherwise noted, concerts are held in the West Building, West Garden Court.

Sound Sketch

New York Opera Society

Challenging Convention: Spanish Modernism in Art and Music in the 1930s
 Music by Rodrigo, Llorca, and others whose music intertwines with Spanish art from the Gallery's collection.

September 27, 12:10

Victory Hall Opera

Heartstrings: Music of the Victorian Parlor
Celebrating Eye of the Sun: Nineteenth-Century Photographs from the National Gallery of Art

Music by Amy Beach, Brahms, Chopin, Stephen Foster, Carrie Jacobs-Bond, George F. Root, and Schumann.

September 29, 3:30

Rachel Barton Pine, violin

Jory Vinikour, harpsichord

J.S. Bach Masterpieces for Violin and Harpsichord

This concert is first in a series of performances by female violinists, showcasing the brilliance and stylistic versatility of the instrument from jazz, bluegrass, and baroque to contemporary classical programs.

October 6, 3:30

General Information

Admission to the National Gallery of Art and all of its programs is free of charge, except as noted.

The use of cameras or recording equipment during the performance is not allowed.

Please be sure that all portable electronic devices are turned off.

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