

Saturday, January 21, 2023 at 8:00pm
Richardson Auditorium, Alexander Hall

SŌ PERCUSSION

The Music of Julius Eastman, with Sō Percussion and guests.

Featuring two landmark works from the 1970s for percussion ensemble and mixed ensemble.

The use of photographic, video, or audio equipment is strictly prohibited. Please turn off or mute electronic devices for the duration of the performance.

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PROGRAM

Sō Percussion discusses Julius Eastman with Victoria Aschheim

Julius Eastman
(1940-1990)

Gay Guerrilla (1979)

Sō Percussion with:

Amy Garapic
Luca Morante
Elijah Shina
Adam Tandler

Guest musicians discuss Julius Eastman with Victoria Aschheim

Stay On It (1973)

Sō Percussion with:

Kennedy Dixon - viola
Amy Garapic - percussion
Anna Meadors - saxophone
Lucy McKnight - vocals
Beth Meyers - viola
Francisco del Pino Herrera - guitar
Khuent Rose - rhodes
Adam Tandler - piano
Darian Thomas - violin
Phong Tran - electronics

PROGRAM NOTES

About five years ago, Sō Percussion met with a representative from G. Schirmer, who had recently acquired the catalog of Julius Eastman's music. He suggested that our approach to music-making and interpretation would fit perfectly with Eastman's flexible, rhythmic works for similar instruments. Also, our unique mix of "precision and anarchy, rigor and bedlam" (as described by *The New Yorker*) seems to match Eastman's aesthetics.

About 90 to 95% of our pieces are newly written in collaboration with composers. When we perform older pieces, there is usually a compelling reason for doing so. In the case of Eastman's music, we saw an opportunity for percussion-driven interpretation to bring out unique layers of groove in his music, as well as a chance to acknowledge that Black and Queer voices of genius like Eastman's in the American avant-garde have been frequently overlooked.

Tonight's interpretations of "Gay Guerilla" and "Stay On It" feature distinctive musical elements: for "Gay Guerilla," which Eastman usually performed with four pianos, we have assembled an orchestra of mallet percussion (the score calls for "any number of similar instruments"). In "Stay On It," we juice the elements of pop and disco through drumset and mallet instruments.

We are so grateful to the many amazing guest musicians who are joining us tonight. If you like what you hear on this concert, our recording of "Stay On It" is available online through the Sō Percussion Editions imprint, with all proceeds benefitting the Castle of our Skins organization.

- Adam Sliwinski
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Gay Guerrilla

“Now the reason I use Gay Guerrilla — G U E R R I L L A, that one — is because these names — let me put a little subsystem here — these names: either I glorify them or they glorify me. And in the case of guerrilla: that glorifies gay — that is to say, there aren’t many gay guerrillas. I don’t feel that ‘gaydom’ has — does have — that strength, so therefore, I use that word in the hopes that they will. You see, I feel that — at this point, I don’t feel that gay guerrillas can really match with ‘Afghani’ guerrillas or ‘PLO’ guerrillas, but let us hope in the future that they might, you see. That’s why I use that word guerrilla: it means a guerrilla is someone who is, in any case, sacrificing his life for a point of view. And, you know, if there is a cause — and if it is a great cause — those who belong to that cause will sacrifice their blood, because, without blood, there is no cause. So, therefore, that is the reason that I use gay guerrilla, in hopes that I might be one, if called upon to be one.”

- Julius Eastman, remarks to the audience at Northwestern University, January 1980

Musicologist Lucian Chessa calls this stirring work “A Minimalist Choralphantasie,” a reference to the compositions based on Lutheran chorales that feature in so many of J.S. Bach’s cantatas. Indeed, the unmistakable and climactic annunciation of “A Mighty Fortress is our God” towards the end of the piece leaves no question that Eastman intended that reference. As Chessa details in his contribution to the recent volume of Eastman scholarship, *Gay Guerilla: Julius Eastman and His Music*, this hymn is repurposed toward the cause of Gay Liberation. Reading the verses within this context heightens the spiritual intensity of Eastman’s point of view:

A mighty fortress is our God
A bulwark never failing;
Our helper he amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great,
And armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

In its composition, “Gay Guerilla” represents what Eastman called “organic music,” where elements, once introduced, compound into later sections of the piece and remain present. It expands and contracts in harmonic density as the snippets of the motives accumulate. The work is meant to be performed by any number of like instruments, and we have chosen to do it as a mallet ensemble with piano.

Stay On It

"There is in America now serious music — so-called — there is a school of music which tries to bring the beat back into music."

- Julius Eastman, talk before a performance of "Stay On It" in Glasgow, Scotland, 1974

"Stay On It" is the first Julius Eastman piece that Sō Percussion learned. When touring stopped abruptly in 2020, we decided to use the time to learn about music that we admired but had never performed. In many ways, this piece connects dots on how we view minimalism from the 1960s and 1970s. We have always wanted to "bring the beat back" into concert music, and better-known works by composers like Steve Reich and Terry Riley have been our vehicle for doing so.

Although the infectious and repetitious opening motive from "Stay On It" suggests a connection to those other works, Eastman's version is distinctive. In Matthew Mendez's article on "Stay On It" in the *Gay Guerilla* collection of essays, our percussionist colleague Jan Williams claims that "[Eastman] was influenced to a degree by the processes involved in these pieces, but that's about it."

Specifically, "Stay On It" is more forthright in playing with ideas from forms of American popular music like soul, R&B, jazz, and the newly burgeoning disco trend, as well as embracing more expansive styles of improvisation. In this sense, his minimalism was *maximal*. Mendez details how Eastman's mentor Lukas Foss at the University of Buffalo would have encouraged this kind of ecumenical taste, and that Eastman didn't see the point of distinguishing between genres:

"For Eastman, who once claimed in response to a song by Earth, Wind, & Fire that he had 'completely lost [his] ability to discriminate between genres of music,' pulsed-based experimentalism and disco had simply become part of a single continuum."

- Mathew Mendez, "That Piece Does Not Exist without Julius," from *Gay Guerilla: Julius Eastman and His Music*.

The work unfolds in three large sections: first, the "riff" anchors the ensemble as little variations are spun off; second, the riff gradually dissolves into noisy, chaotic improvisation; third, a mystical repeated cadence slowly morphs into solo improvisation and a lonely tambourine.

ABOUT

Julius Eastman

Julius Eastman (1940-1990) was an artist who, as a gay, black man, aspired to live those roles to the fullest. He was not only a prominent member of New York's downtown scene as a composer, conductor, singer, pianist, and choreographer, but also performed at Lincoln Center with Pierre Boulez and the New York Philharmonic, and recorded experimental disco with producer Arthur Russell. 'Eastman is something of a cult figure among composers and singers', reads a 1980 press release.

Despite his prominence in the artistic and musical community in New York, Eastman died homeless and alone in a Buffalo, NY hospital, his death unreported until eight months later, in a *Village Voice* obituary by Kyle Gann. He left behind few scores and recordings, and his music lay dormant for decades until a three-CD set of his compositions was issued in 2005 by New World Records. In the years since, there has been a steady increase in attention paid to his music and life, punctuated by newly found recordings and manuscripts, the publication of *Gay Guerrilla*, a comprehensive volume of biographical essays and analysis, worldwide performances and new arrangements of his surviving works, and newfound interest from choreographers, scholars, educators, and journalists. 'The brazen and brilliant music of Julius Eastman...commands attention: wild, grand, delirious, demonic, an uncontainable personality surging into sound', writes Alex Ross for *The New Yorker*.

Sō Percussion

For twenty years and counting, Sō Percussion has redefined chamber music for the 21st century through an “exhilarating blend of precision and anarchy, rigor and bedlam” (*The New Yorker*). They are celebrated by audiences and presenters for a dazzling range of work: for live performances in which “telepathic powers of communication” (*The New York Times*) bring to life the vibrant percussion repertoire; for an extravagant array of collaborations in classical music, pop, indie rock, contemporary dance, and theater; and for their work in education and community, creating opportunities and platforms for music and artists that explore the immense possibility of art in our time.

Recent highlights have included performances at the Elbphilharmonie, Big Ears 2022 – where they performed *Amid the Noise*, premiered a new work by Angélica Negrón with the Kronos Quartet, and performed their Nonesuch album with Caroline Shaw, *Let the Soil Play Its Simple Part* – and a return to Carnegie Hall where they performed new collaborations with Nathalie Joachim, and Dominic Shodekeh Talifero. Their Nonesuch recording, “Narrow Sea,” with Caroline Shaw, Dawn Upshaw, and Gilbert Kalish, won the 2022 Grammy for Best Composition. Other albums include *A Record Of..* on Brassland Music with Buke and Gase, and an acclaimed version of Julius Eastman’s “Stay On It” on new imprint Sō Percussion Editions. This adds to a catalogue of more than twenty-five albums featuring landmark recordings of works by David Lang, Steve Reich, Steve Mackey, and many more.

In the Summer of 2022, Sō performed at the Music Academy of the West Festival, Newport Classical, at Time Spans in New York, and offers four concerts at Our Festival in Helsinki – including a performance of *Let the Soil* with Caroline Shaw. Other 22/23 dates include concerts for Cal Performances, at the Palau de la Musica Catalana in Barcelona, at the Barbican in London, the Kennedy Center, and at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

In Fall 2022, Sō Percussion begins its ninth year as the Edward T. Cone performers-in-residence at Princeton University. Rooted in the belief that music is an elemental form of human communication, and galvanized by forces for social change in recent years, Sō enthusiastically pursues a range of social and community outreach through their nonprofit organization, including partnerships with local ensembles including Pan in Motion and Castle of Our Skins; their Brooklyn Bound concert series; a studio residency program in Brooklyn; and the Sō Percussion Summer Institute, an intensive two-week chamber music seminar for percussionists and composers.

Sō Percussion is - Eric Cha-Beach, Josh Quillen, Adam Sliwinski, and Jason Treuting.

www.sopercussion.com

THANK YOU

Thank you to the Department of Music at Princeton University.

Sō Percussion wishes to thank all of their donors. Sō Percussion's 2022-2023 season is supported in part by awards from:

- The National Endowment for the Arts. To find out more about how National Endowment for the Arts grants impact individuals and communities, visit www.arts.gov
- The New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature
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Sō Percussion uses Vic Firth sticks, Zildjian cymbals, Remo drumheads, Estey Organs, and Pearl/Adams instruments. Sō Percussion would like to thank these companies for their generous support and donations.



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