

Julius Eastman

SYMPHONY NO. II

The Faithful Friend: The Lover Friend's Love for the Beloved. (1983)

Luciano Chessa, Editor

Unless other works surface, the orchestral piece you are about to experience is both Julius Eastman's only symphonic composition and his last large-scale work. This piece survived thanks to poet R. Nemo Hill, Eastman's lover in the year it was written and the dedicatee of the work. Hill kept the manuscript in a drawer for several decades; composer Mary Jane Leach eventually included a copy of it in her Eastman website, and there is where I first saw it.

At the time Eastman wrote it, there would have not been any concrete hope for this symphony to get a performance. The work was not a commission, and none of Eastman's professional connections could have helped this score to land on any conductor's stands. Eastman turned this problem into an asset. As it usually is the case, working with a blank canvas became for him the opportunity to let his imagination run unchecked.

Having effectively gained distance from Minimalism with such works as *Gay Guerrilla* (1979) and *The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc* (1981), and ironically benefiting from an involuntary *tabula rasa* (only a few months earlier he was evicted from his East Village apartment and thus famously lost of all his scores), Eastman is here exploring new territories. Yet—here is the tragic part—this moment will coincide with the point in which, forced by a combination of misfortune and self-destruction, he *de facto* gave up with his composing career. Sadly, this symphony is followed by only a handful of small-scale works.

Part of this compositional exploration contemplated the re-embracing of historical forms he absorbed during his training at Curtis, and an uncompromising Modernist sensibility: trends anticipated in the two above-mentioned 1979-81 scores. Furthermore, this symphony is among the few late works by Eastman to show the influence of one of his early mentors, Morton Feldman. This is particularly evident in the treatment of the timpani part—truly the spine of the piece—and, more in general, by the tectonic pace with which most of this piece moves.

Permeated by a syncretic religiosity found in several of his later works (aside from the above-mentioned *Gay Guerrilla* and *The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc*, we should here mention *Hail Mary* and the last *Our Father*), filled with many references, descriptive texts (eschatological, private) and a complex labeling of recurring motifs that feels Berlioz-esque, Wagnerian, but also not far from what we find in La Monte Young, in one single movement Eastman draws the entire arc of his relationship with Hill: from the opening statement of endless love, to the climactic fugato depicting his and Hill's sexual union, to the many loose ends of a relationship that has failed, and up to the feeble restating of a love that, despite all, is set to transcend space and time.

While the Symphony literally traces this biographical arc, I cannot resist reading in it the allegory of another one: that of Eastman's relationships with his own practice. The synchronicity of catastrophes, preceded by promising beginnings yet followed by the teleological hope for final redemptions, is too compelling a reading to leave it unmentioned. Because even though this is the work of a man hitting rock bottom while still utterly undisturbed by material preoccupations and thus production concerns (see below for the unconventional orchestral forces it requires), why write a symphony at all if there is no hope that one day— someday—it will be performed?

The work has indeed never been performed in part because it calls for, as said earlier, rather idiosyncratic forces (3 Flutes, 2 Oboes, 2 English Horns, 3 Bass Clarinets, 3 Contrabass Clarinets, 3 Bassoons, 3 Contrabassoons, 3 Trombones, 3 Tubas, Strings, and a setup of 24 Timpani requiring 6 performers), but also because the manuscript needed a robust editorial intervention.

Eastman's manuscript bears no time signatures, no tempo or metronome markings, no dynamics, and no bar lines, though all the parts were here intended to be synchronized by a *tactus*. Naturally, many other Eastman manuscripts lack similar information, and even more (for example in a piece like *Gay Guerrilla*, the deliberate avoidance of a *tactus* is what makes the work shimmer). Yet these pieces did not use more than a few parts at once, and were produced with the composer performing in the group and even taking on the role of band leader/conductor. Perhaps the sheer size of this Symphony, and its obviously complex rehearsal issues, first lead me to join others in the belief that the work was incomplete, accidentally left unfinished, abandoned.

Nemo gave me a clue that led me to re-examine the situation. Speaking with him, I learned that Eastman gave him the copy of the manuscript in a sort of ritualized ceremony that took place at the time when the two had just broke up. More importantly, Eastman told Nemo in that occasion that the Symphony was a diary of their relationship.

Who would stage a signing ceremony to give an *accidentally* unfinished piece as a gift to an ex-lover? In my mind this ritual only makes sense if the piece was *deliberately* left unfinished: as if mirroring the way in which some relationships ends.

Fascination for fragments aside (Heraclitus, Nietzsche, Kafka...), when I focused on *what was there* instead of *what may have been missing*, there is when I saw in this piece a perfectly calibrated arc, with the main theme presented at the beginning and, the climax being reached, restated at the end, as if in a promising whisper.

The *many loose ends of a relationship* in pieces, and then, perhaps the consolation of a group of friends, perhaps in a bar, helping you to pick up those pieces... As I realized *what was there*, I was shaking in tears.

Adam Shatz has written beautifully about the importance of humanizing Eastman in our

process of writing his history. It just occurred to me that the Symphony No. II may be that one point in which his humanity is more clearly revealed.

As I am going through the emotions of rehearsing this quiet, relentless masterpiece, a work that I now believe to be the arrival point of his output, I realize that here Eastman is no longer the soldier in the queer army or the black activist. He is a human being dealing with the most human of feelings: the loss of love. Wrapped in embroidered medieval-like allegories, this symphony is an expansive breakup “song.”

All this is what gave me the fuel to create a diplomatic edition of the score, a step necessary to allow the work to be performed. The editorial process alone required a considerable amount of time—adding dynamics to this work, for example, was akin to sculpting large blocks of marble. More in general, I felt like I took up the role of a co-composer even though I did not add a single note to it (if an accusation can be made to me, is that I chose to be stubbornly literal, while taking great steps to avoid being what Korsakov was for Mussorgsky or— worse— what Alfano was for Puccini). One can say that accepting the deliberate unfinishedness of a work, that too is a creative act. If so, the act of conducting this Symphony today completes my work as an editor: a live presentation of it is truly the best way I know to prove that this composition is complete.

It took me years to make the dream of performing this piece come true. My edition of the score was made possible thanks to Performa, the NYC’s Biennial of Performance Art; a residency at the Steel House in Rockland, Maine, and Schirmer, the publisher of the work. Guidance came in many instances from Mary Jane Leach and R. Nemo Hill: I am indebted to both. The performance is made possible by The New School/Mannes, and the generosity of Dean Richard Kessler and Music Director David Hayes.

Thanks to Richard, this premiere is taking place precisely in the manner I had hoped: with a wonderfully caring Orchestra, in a highly-visible public venue, and in the city where Eastman composed it. I always felt NYC owed at least this to such profoundly moving work. Call it a vindication.

Luciano Chessa

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