

Sound Expertise Season 3:12 –

Reviving Julius Eastman with Mary Jane Leach

Transcribed by Andrew Dell'Antonio

Mary Jane Leach 00:00

I don't expect to be praised or any special favors or anything like that. But I don't expect to be -- not ridiculed, but demonized for... because, where was everybody else? Because I tried so hard to get other people to pick up the slack. And no one was interested and now it's like, hands off, but it wasn't until he began to do well and his music was starting to be played, that people became... got involved.

[Music] 00:31

Will Robin 00:52

So, there's this famous story in the history of classical music, and I'm going to tell you the extremely abridged and simplified version. In 1829, the composer Felix Mendelssohn conducted the first performance of Bach's St. Matthew Passion in decades, Bach's music had fallen into obscurity after his death in 1750 and Mendelssohn's championing almost single handedly revived his work and helped it achieve the stature it commands today. Welcome back to sound expertise. I'm your host, Will Robin, and this is a podcast where I talk to my fellow music scholars about their research and why it matters. This is not an episode about Mendelssohn and Bach, but it is an episode about the idea of revival, what it means to bring the work of a composer back to life long after they've died. The musician we're talking about today is the avant-garde composer-performer Julius Eastman. And though he lived in the late 20th century, his revival is not all that dissimilar from that of Bach. We are confronted with what it means to play his music without his presence, which includes the practicalities of gathering materials and preparing musical performances, but also broader ideological questions that revival often raises. My guest today is the Felix Mendelssohn of the Eastman revival. The composer and scholar Mary Jane Leach, who has done an extraordinary amount to bring Eastman's music and life into focus, after he died in obscurity in 1990. Our conversation is about the logistics of her work, but also the ethics, because this moment of so called Eastmania has become incredibly fraught, as so many different figures and institutions claim his legacy and grapple with how his race, sexuality, and musical provocations might shape what we make of his work today. I think you will learn a lot from and perhaps be challenged by this conversation.

[Music] 02:47

Will Robin 02:58

So let's start at the beginning. When did you first meet Julius Eastman?

Mary Jane Leach 03:04

Okay, well, I have a revised story for that, if you want to hear it. I always had this story where he and I were hired to be in a play doing kind of extended techniques, kind of voice things. And I've never met him before. And my memory is that he walked in, black leather and chains and drinking scotch at 10 in

the morning. But it wasn't actually my first meeting with him. My first meeting was a couple of weeks earlier. God knows why everything happened. That is like February, March, April of 1981. And someone sent me this program. And there are all these performances on it, and I was one of the performers on the program. But there was also this group called Lewis Eastman Lewis. So the person who sent me the flyer said -- could that be Julius Eastman? And I said -- Gee, I don't know. I think I would have remembered meeting him. But it turned out that that was indeed Julius on this. Joe Lewis is a visual artist and his father used to do things with him. So they sang barbershop songs with Julius and then handed up pie [laughs] but I don't have any memory of meeting Julius, and it might actually be true that I didn't meet him. Because there are a lot of performers and you're getting ready for your thing. So I might not have actually met him, but it's kind of sobering because I don't remember what I was performing. So, how can I remember what someone else's performing when I can't remember what I was performing? [laughs]

Will Robin 05:01

I've never heard of that concert... It seems like every little bit I find out about Eastman, some totally -- barbershop quartets and pie doesn't... I don't know, that's not in that's not in any of the books, right?

Mary Jane Leach 05:13

[Laughs] No, 'cause the story is, he's such a big personality that everybody comes away... but then there was another situation when they recorded the Joan of Arc piece for 10 cellos. And it was all giggers. And it happened very fast. And it was written out so that people just sat down and played it. And because it was such a condensed period of time, none of the cellists remember him, because there wasn't time to chit chat, or do anything like that, so.

Will Robin 05:53

And so were you familiar with his music at that point in 1981, when you first met, or was he totally new to you?

Mary Jane Leach 06:00

No, he was totally new to me. And a couple of weeks later, in April, that was when he premiered the Joan piece with Andy Degrow at the kitchen. And so that was the first music of his I heard. Actually, when I started the whole project of tracking down his music, that was really the only piece of his that I'd heard. I'd heard him do a solo concert with piano, and probably voice at Roulette. And I hadn't heard anything. So, it was just... he was just part of the crowd, basically.

Will Robin 06:37

So you start looking into his music in the late 90s, posthumously after he passes away, but you weren't particularly close with him during his lifetime?

Mary Jane Leach 06:47

No, no.

Will Robin 06:48

And so can you talk a little bit about how ... it's 1998, right, when you first started looking into his music,

Mary Jane Leach 06:55

Right. Well, I was asked to teach a class at CalArts. And it was to teach composition using real instruments. And to them real instruments meant notated scores. Because most of the composers on the faculty there were doing electronics, or they're doing... Mark Trail did these gimmick toy pieces, where you take unusual objects and make sound with them. So, they asked me to write for real instruments, and I thought — Well, what a great way to teach, explain or get people to understand an instrument by playing pieces with multiples of the same instrument. It's sort of the Uber sound. [laughs] So that's what I did. And so of course, I wanted to do a cello piece. And I think Julius's was the only one I knew at that time. So I started trying to track down the cello piece. And I talked with ... Lois Vierk had a copy of the piece. And then when she went to make a dub for me, the tape was not in the box. So she had obviously left it in somebody's tape machine, and they never discovered it, or they just didn't know what it was, or maybe it wasn't even labeled. Who knows. But she told me who she'd gotten a copy from. And are familiar with C. Brian Ulaan. I don't used to. He used to... what was the name, was First Avenue the name of the group and it was with Matt Sullivan.

Will Robin 08:47

Okay. Yeah, I've heard that.

Mary Jane Leach 08:49

Yeah, I think it was mostly a duo with Matt Sullivan, the oboist ... so anyway, what was I saying...

Will Robin 09:02

getting the tape

Mary Jane Leach 09:04

Oh, getting the tape. So, of course, when you're making a dub, you have to do it in real time. You can't put it in and 10 seconds later, it's done. If it's a 30-minute piece, it takes 30 minutes to dub. So while I'm waiting for the cassette to get dubbed, because Brian did have a copy of it, we started talking about Julius and that was the first that I knew that his music had disappeared. And, I was totally unaware of the whole Julius story. I knew nothing. All I wanted was the piece for 10 cellos. And so I got the tape. And if I hadn't been so easy with the 10-cello piece, I don't know if I would have kept doing it. [Laughs] But what happened was, it was part of a radio program. So at the end, there was the credits. So there was the sound engineer and all the performers. And then there was that bonus piece of the Prelude to Joan of Arc, which was his solo piece, solo improv. So that gave me a little leg up. And actually, the engineer was an old boyfriend of mine. And I knew that he probably had the tape. And he did, actually. But it was the one time I've ever known him to be kind of sloppy, the spine on the box, there was no writing on it, it might have even... I don't think it had any writing on it, he usually would put the score in the box, and you would know what the levels and everything were. And there was nothing, absolutely nothing. And so it was that Julius energy, I guess, permeated even Steve and the prelude wasn't recorded at the same time. And Steve actually knew nothing about it -- Steve Kellum. And so Julius just showed up one day, and had Steve lug his equipment up to Julius's apartment. And I had this hunch, and I asked him about it. And he said it was true, that he basically just had a list of the words he wanted to improv on, and that was the piece. So it's just like a... I don't know if you could say structured improv,

but he had the names of the saints, and he had the words that they said, and that was the piece. But as a little aside, I had this fantasy about him and ... who's the guy who wrote Robert le Diable?

Will Robin 11:50

Meyerbeer.

Mary Jane Leach 11:51

Meyerbeer. So Meyerbeer also included Ein Feste Burg in one of his pieces. And Robert le Diable, I was listening to live broadcasts on the BBC. And I swear it was this... there was a baritone solo, and it was exactly what Julius had written. I mean, it was -- granted it's mostly just like a chord [sings four pitches] and Robert le Diable did the bottom note in the chord and Julius didn't. But they were the same pitch...

Will Robin 12:30

I have to look that up. That's interesting.

Mary Jane Leach 12:31

it was just the timbre, so it's probably just a fantasy on my part. But the similarity is so strikingly close that you can't help but fantasize that it's actually ... And Julius had a very wide knowledge of classical music. He was in the performance of Rosenkavalier at SPAC, the first year that it opened, with Ormandy conducting. It was a small part. But he was certainly aware of the canon of classical music. He wasn't just a new music groupie who grew up listening to pop records, and then decided to buy a guitar and play in a group, which a lot of people were doing at that time.

Will Robin 12:36

Right, the Glenn Branca kind of thing. So you track down a couple of tapes, and how does it become more of a thing for you in terms of really trying to gather as much material as you can, what's the appeal of the music for you? And, what's the goal of the project?

Mary Jane Leach 13:52

Well, what happened was that I was trying to find the score. Because I figured... I mean, I lucked out so much in the beginning, because it was pretty easy to find the tape. And even though it was missing, it was easy to go to someone who had it and record it, and to have all the credits to follow was a big help. But, so, as I kept contacting people for the score, I realized that everything was missing. And so I decided to not waste that effort. And I just backtracked a little bit, and said -- Well, I know I asked you about the score, but do you have any other scores or any recordings or anything like that? And so that's how it happened. And then I was talking with Paul Tai at New World Records. And he asked me what I was doing, I was telling him about Julius and of course, he knew Julius because Julius worked for him at Tower Records. And so he's -- oh, I've been wanting to do a CD of Julius's music do you think you could find enough to put out? Sure! Because it had been fairly easy. And then just from that point on, it was just like banging my head against the wall, I'd be referred to somebody and then they'd refer to somebody else and then they'd refer to another person, and then that person will refer back to me. And it was before email and websites and so you'd write a letter and like six weeks later, you'd get it returned and that kind of thing. So I was overconfident, if I'd known how difficult it would be, I don't

know if I would have started. But once I started, I was too stubborn to stop [laughs]. And he was lucky in a way because Buffalo University really was into archiving. So almost every concert was taped. And every tiny, the tiniest bit of press, they put in a book and they have folders and folders of... or binders full of press for the music concerts. So he was lucky in a way because especially for downtown music, people didn't make programs for all their concerts. I don't think I even had a program until 1992. And I think that the Kitchen had programs, but that was about the only place that had programs. So one place that I discovered sort of after the fact was ... you know the Ear magazine, right?

Will Robin 16:53

Of course, very well. Yeah.

Mary Jane Leach 16:55

Yeah. Well, it used to come out frequently enough that it would have concert listings.

Will Robin 16:59

Yeah, on the back.

Mary Jane Leach 17:01

And so I found out about a lot of concerts just through ... I had a whole bunch of old Ear magazines. And so that was a really good source, as well. Tracking down things.

Will Robin 17:15

So as you're building this collection of scores and recordings, how aware are you becoming of Eastman as a person, Eastman as someone who... you mentioned he had a big personality, but also very kind of outspoken and political. And also, as someone who struggled towards the end of his life with all kinds of different issues.

Mary Jane Leach 17:39

Yeah, I never saw the struggling part so... I think he probably kept that from most people. I mean, he obviously didn't hide it from a lot of people. But I don't think the general group of people that we hung out in in the new music circles, knew all of his problems and issues. When Unjust Malaise came out, I had been speaking with his mother off and on quite a bit. But then I was asked to write about Julius before the CD came out for New Music Box. And the thing that's stuck with me is that she said, even as a baby, he didn't like to be held. You know, she says -- what baby doesn't like to be held, or touched. So that kind of openness, but then stand-offness was there right from the very beginning. It was in his DNA, I guess.

Will Robin 18:46

Yeah, that's interesting.

Mary Jane Leach 18:47

How else can you explain it?

Will Robin 18:50

It seems, despite the fact that there is this large corpus of material in Buffalo, and obviously, all the stuff that that you tracked down, it also seemed like he was maybe opposed to the idea of his work in some way being preserved. Do you think that's the case?

Mary Jane Leach 19:09

I think it was, because Nemo, his lover, said that he was using copies of the Joan of Arc score to line the cat box. And when he was evicted, according to Anthony Coleman, a bunch of people got organized, and they got some money for him so that he could pay the back rent. And he just turned around and gave it to somebody else and said, well, they, he needs it more than I do. So he was still the master of his destiny. He said he was beyond writing, although it seems that he did still write, but some of the pieces of his I wonder whether they actually... whether he expected them to be performed, like Symphony two, because the instrumentation itself is overwhelming, it's just... and Luciano Chessa finished the piece and organized the performance edition of it. And it's a small miracle, I just didn't think it would ever, could ever be performed. And I think of Buddha kind of in the same way, because back then everybody would write little things, and not expect them to be performed, it was more of a visual thing than anything else. And I had a voice teacher, the same voice teacher as Meredith Monk. And before I started studying with her, I was studying with her husband, who also sang in those circles, and he knew Julius, and all the time, a year or two that I was standing by his piano, singing, there was this drawing that Julius had made that was on the wall, right by where everybody was singing, which is kind of cool. It was a little figure climbing through the air with a cape and some notes and... [laughs] it's a small world, everybody seems to overlap.

Will Robin 21:38

You mentioned how his personality, what you knew of his personality fed this path that that he took. There's certainly been a lot written in the last few years about his identity as well, in terms of being Black and queer and outspoken about his identity and politics. From your knowledge of -- you're moving in the same crowds, whether or not you're friends with him when he's alive. How much do you think that his marginalized identity contributed to how he considered his position in the new music world and also how institutions may or may not have supported him during his lifetime?

Mary Jane Leach 22:28

Well, he had a habit of asking exorbitant amounts of money for things. He supposedly had been offered a job at the Paris Conservatoire. And he named a price that was just impossibly large. And if you look at the -- the Walker has an archive. You've probably seen that. And you saw his demands for the rehearsal and the equipment expected. And it's like -- what are you thinking? It would take the whole budget for a festival or something like that. So it's difficult. There are parts that are, where he was probably discriminated against, or just looked at like the mascot or something, the quirky fellow to have around. But some of it was real, and some of it was sort of self-inflicted, it's hard to ... I'm not a psychologist [laughs]. And I, you know, I didn't know him that that well, I only knew him in retrospect, later on. But he didn't make things easy for himself. But there's certain gaps in his life history. When he graduated from Curtis, what did he do for five years?

Will Robin 24:21

We just don't really know.

Mary Jane Leach 24:22

No. Some of the time he lived in the Ithaca area, and the choral conductor there, I forget his name, would get him hired for a singing assignment. The thing at SPAC with Ormandy was one of them and things like that. But there's no pieces of his and when he gave a concert, the concert at Town Hall, it was all old stuff, stuff that he had done at Curtis, or improv kind of kind of thing. So what was he doing? And then there was a period when he was going to Curtis, where he seems like he had a little breakdown, because he just showed up late and was having a difficult time. And then he changed majors from piano major to composition. Because he didn't start studying piano until he was 14. And that's pretty late for someone who's going to a conservatory, and some of his fellow students said -- he was a great pianist, but his technique wasn't all that great. And he was from a small environment and going into a city and being black and gay, it just seems like the cards were stacked against him, because when I was thinking of going to college, if I had gone to... I was thinking of Cooper Union, being 18, and from a Vermont town, and getting an apartment and dealing with a whole different kind of environment is overwhelming. And he had to find his own housing and everything too. So it's a lot to take on, on top of the environment of being in a conservatory, which, as far as I understand, is pretty dog eat dog [laughs].

Will Robin 26:45

So let's talk a bit about the major revival of his music that I think you've helped shepherd and that really seems to have exploded in the last decade or so. What has it felt like to help both witness and participate in Eastmania at this point, [Mary Jane laughs] which is this constant, fascinate... interest in his music now from institutions, scholars, musicians?

Mary Jane Leach 27:12

Yeah. Well, it's interesting, because being a naive musicologist -- because I don't consider myself a musicologist -- I've come to realize that there are a lot of agendas out there. And different people are using him to prove a point, which sometimes doesn't have anything to do with *him*.

Will Robin 27:39

In what sense?

Mary Jane Leach 27:41

Oh, like, without knowing anything about him, they make all these assumptions about his personality, or if he had a difficult time, or ... one was a lawyer who was a housing lawyer, so she was gonna apply Julius's situation to, if he'd lived in New York, when there was housing provided... he already had housing, and he blew it off. So, different ... I don't really want to get into all the gory details, but there are a lot of agendas going on. At first, it was just the excitement of the music. But then you get these... I'm sure you've heard about the whole Halifax thing, right?

Will Robin 28:37

Yeah. I wanted to ask about that.

Mary Jane Leach 28:39

Yeah. That was the most drastic, but it's not atypical, asking me to talk about him and discuss the titles. And then when I discussed the titles, I was publicly humiliated.

Will Robin 29:00

Can you talk maybe a little bit for listeners who might not know what happened, what happened in Halifax with the festival in 2019 that you participated in?

Mary Jane Leach 29:08

Yeah, well, what's interesting is that I was brought on for my music, and they didn't program any of Julius's music, but they thought since I was there, I could talk about him. And so I did. And we had agreed beforehand, what I would discuss and discuss the titles, I always give a little preamble, this is the situation and I apologize, but, then I go through the titles, what's -- because I figured, in a serious environment, if you just sort of make up titles, and you're assuming that ... how do you know if that's the real title or ... you know what I mean?

Will Robin 29:56

So just to be clear, these are titles of his pieces that use the N word, and you contextualize this, but then you spoke the word in the context of saying...

Mary Jane Leach 30:07

I did, but I also played his explanation at the Northwestern University, his explanation of the titles before the... while everybody was filing in so... And the thing is, that when I finished the talk, everybody was very happy. It was like -- Good talk. But this woman who had an agenda brought these vulnerable kids in, after I'd given my talk, to complain about the use of the N word. And then first of all, why would you expose vulnerable kids to a situation like that, when you knew that that was gonna be there? And so they were the ones who complained about me, even though they weren't there for the lecture, so I have a little hard feelings about it. And then we all hung out afterwards. It was great. Everybody was so happy with my talk, blah, blah, blah. And just before my concert starts, they call me in and they said -- We're canceling your concert. What? So they said -- Well, we're canceling because some people complained. And it's too traumatic for them to have to listen to your music. I said -- Well, I think my music's pretty healing. They said -- No, no, no, so I said -- Well, you have to make it clear what the situation was. And so they didn't, they got up and said -- she performed a violent act. And we think it's too traumatic for you have to have to listen to her music. [Laughs incredulously] But what can you do? I was played for a fool. Because they set me up. And then this one woman who had an agenda got away. I got a lot of support afterwards, but still it leaves a very bad taste.

Will Robin 32:14

What did you learn from that experience, both in terms of the Eastman revival, and also how you are navigating it now?

Mary Jane Leach 32:24

Well, it was obvious that they weren't interested in Julius or Julius's music at all. One of the things that they did was -- I had brought up some of his new CDs and the book, they took all of that off the table. So they weren't... well, if you're so interested in Julius Eastman, and upholding his vision, why are you

first of all, not programming his music, and then taking away ... [laughs] people's chance to hear his music or read about him? The whole thing just was really weird.

Will Robin 33:09

Do you think much about the fact that he was a gay black man, and you're a white woman? How do you reflect on that as a supporter of his music and as someone thinking about promoting his music, when this can be a vexing issue?

Mary Jane Leach 33:32

I don't expect to be praised or any special favors or anything like that. But I don't expect to be -- not ridiculed, but demonized for... because, where was everybody else? Because I tried so hard to get other people to pick up the slack. And no one was interested and now it's like, hands off, but it wasn't until he began to do well and his music was starting to be played, that people became... got involved. And a lot of it is career moves, frankly, so it's hard not to feel bitter about it. Because for me, it was just all about the music. And I didn't want people to think -- Oh, poor Julius Eastman, or crazy Julius Eastman. I wanted them to go -- Julius Eastman, love his music.

Will Robin 34:26

And in terms of -- beyond this incident -- the larger revival, how are you navigating the fact that now, he's being professionally published by Schirmer? That must change things for locating scores and tapes and how things are circulated and stuff like that.

Mary Jane Leach 34:49

Well, I'm still not sure how great Schirmer's is because I still get lots of requests for information because they can't figure it out from or get an answer from Schirmer's. But it's great. I really wanted to get back to my own music and not get sucked into the Eastman thing. But, it's gratifying. But then, as soon as it began to be gratifying, it began to be really frustrating, because then then people came out of the woodwork and wanted to protect his legacy. And I don't want to get too involved in this.

Will Robin 35:31

So what kinds of stuff are you doing with Eastman's music these days? Have you come across any new manuscripts? Are you still hunting for things? Or are you ...

Mary Jane Leach 35:43

No. Let other people do it. I'm not interested in performing the music. If I find out about something and get a lead, I'll find out about it, that kind of thing. I used to do things like, Kerry's a good example, have you seen this? In terms of a new score or something like that. But until Schirmer's came in, I just felt like there had to be -- I had things on my website, because, frankly, Julius's brother didn't want to have anything to do with anything until it became profitable. So I just put scores on my website so that people could download them and I wouldn't have to copy things or forward things. So that was how that happened. And my goal was to not have to do anything anymore, that other people would take up the slack and carry on.

Will Robin 36:53

Well, thank you so much for speaking with me. I really appreciate it.

Mary Jane Leach 36:57

Yeah. I hope I didn't come up too bitter. [Both laugh]

Will Robin 37:01

A little bit, but I think [both laugh] you explained your bitterness well, I think, at least I'm sorry that ...
Yeah. Well, thank you.

Mary Jane Leach 37:15

You're welcome!

[Music] 37:17

Will Robin 37:22

Thank you to Mary Jane leach for that fascinating conversation. You can read more of her work and her music over on our website sound expertise dot work. As always, our inboxes open if you have questions or thoughts about the show, email us sound expertise 00 at gmail, or tag me on Twitter or Insta at seated ovation. Many thanks to de Edward Davis for his production work, you can check out his music on SoundCloud and warm silence. I'm grateful as always to Andrew F Dell'Antonio for transcribing our episodes to make them more accessible. And next week on sound expertise, hip hop on death row.

Unidentified Speaker 37:58

I do have a desire and a time to share about the process of recording this music because I did feel like it was something that was important. For my knowledge no one ever in the history of recorded music has recorded any music on death row. So I did feel like it was important.

Will Robin 38:20

See you then.

[Music] 38:53