

Wild Up at CIM: graphic scores & Julius Eastman

by Mike Telin



On the homepage of the new music ensemble Wild Up, you're met with this description of who they are: "We're Wild Up. We're a band. An experiment in its second decade. We make shows, and records. We tell stories and make projects that live somewhere between new music and theater and performance art and pop."

On Sunday, March 24 at 7:30 pm in Mixon Hall, the CIM Perspectives series will present the new music and composer collective Wild Up. Their program includes works by Raven Chacon, inti figgis-vizueta, Jürg Frey, Felipe Lara, and Julius Eastman. The concert is free but seating passes are [required](#).

I caught up with artistic director and conductor Christopher Roundtree (pictured) by phone and began the conversation by asking him to talk me through the group's program.

Raven Chacon's *Whistle Quartet*

We all love Raven, and *Whistle Quartet* is beautiful. It's a graphic score with simple instructions. It says the first player should use a very small whistle to create a musical line of their choosing that responds to the score. And then another player comes in and tries to replicate that line as accurately as possible, followed by a third person, then a fourth person, and so on.

Raven's scores are beautiful to look at, and his *Zitkála-Šá* score was in the 2022 Whitney Biennial.

Julius Eastman's *Buddha*

We go directly into this piece — the entire program will be played *attacca*. *Buddha* is also a graphic score that's shaped like an egg and has these note heads and beautiful melodies. It looks like a traditional score in that the high notes are at the top and the low notes are at the bottom, but we don't have a recording, so we really don't know if Eastman performed it from left to right or from top to bottom.

When we were looking at the score we realized that we all had a different interpretation of how we should do it. So we tried both and kind of figured out a way to perform it so that both are happening simultaneously.

inti figgis-vizueta's *form the fabric*

We performed this many years ago when inti was a student at the National Composers Intensive at the Los Angeles Philharmonic. The score has many instructions including an arc and a suggestion about what kind of textures should come one after the next.

One section indicates that it should sound dense. Another indicates that a very high note should be played by one person but doesn't say who it should be. The rest of the page suggests options for pitches, textures, and melodies, so the player is determining how to use all of those options and in what sequence.

It's a pretty cool work that is built completely different from how we think of most modern classical music.

Jürg Frey's *Grizzana*

The score is beautiful. I've never seen more beautiful handwriting from a composer. It looks like little petals on a flower hanging off of a little branch. And the handwriting is so delicate that it engenders this really interesting type of performance, because the ensemble is playing as delicately as the notation looks.

inti figgis-vizueta's *talamh*

This is another beautiful piece. It was originally written as a string quartet, but now large ensembles of mixed instruments play it. So our entire ensemble will play it.

Felipe Lara's *Ventos Uivantes*

I'll conduct it and it's the only work on the program that is notated in a modern style. It has amazing solos, particularly for bassoon and for flute. But everybody is playing these beautiful melodies that are very tightly notated — they're not quite "new complexity," but they are very complex melodies.

Julius Eastman's *Gay Guerrilla*

This is Eastman's masterwork. Basically it has an open instrumentation that is symphonic in its scope. And it's exhausting to perform.

We all will have stopwatches because every few minutes there's a different set of prompts. One line feels like it could be sung — just two notes that are so mournful, kind of calling out high above the staff. And there's a driving rhythm for the entire duration of about 28 minutes.

The score doesn't have dynamic markings so we are choosing when it's quiet when it's loud. Because we've played it so many times, we've realized that the dynamics become contagious — if one person starts to make a more aggressive timbre, or articulation, all of us start to do it.

And in Eastman fashion there's a loud, cacophonous middle section. He often has hymns that appear in his works, and here it's *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*. Everyone in the ensemble will take that melody as a solo, so there's this kind of cascading religious music. And the melody, which is really a scale, keeps ascending until the piece ends.

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Wild Up has dedicated an entire project to the music of Julius Eastman. "When you're starting to play someone's music that is new to you, you realize right away if it's your music or not your music. And as soon as we started to play Eastman's music, we thought, this music feels like it's teaching us to play it," Roundtree said.

The ensemble began playing Eastman's works in 2013 at a minimalist festival presented by the LA Philharmonic. "We started with *Stay On It*. We had our own arrangement because at that time there was no score, so we pulled it from a recording, and at the end of the rehearsal we all kind of thought, 'Why was that so fun? Why are we in such a good mood?' This music felt so freeing to play, so our immediate love of Eastman was from that perspective."

Roundtree said that Eastman composed works that are transcendental to play, and that democratize the room. “They make everyone come into themselves — everyone has to be in dialogue with everyone else. There are pieces about race, gender, and sexuality, and they’re about the history of America. All the reasons why we love Frederic Rzewski’s music.”

Roundtree pointed out that when it comes to Eastman’s music, many times there is a score but no recording. “Because the scores are in open format, we don’t really know how a piece is supposed to go. So a recording is the best score, because then we have Eastman’s interpretation — we are listening to him perform his own pieces. And with some pieces like *Gay Guerrilla*, we have these amazing recordings of his performances and we have the score.”

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