Duke Ellington: The Symphonic Portrait

The United States Air Force Orchestra

Colonel Lowell E. Graham
Commander/Conductor

Washington, D.C.

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Duke Elling

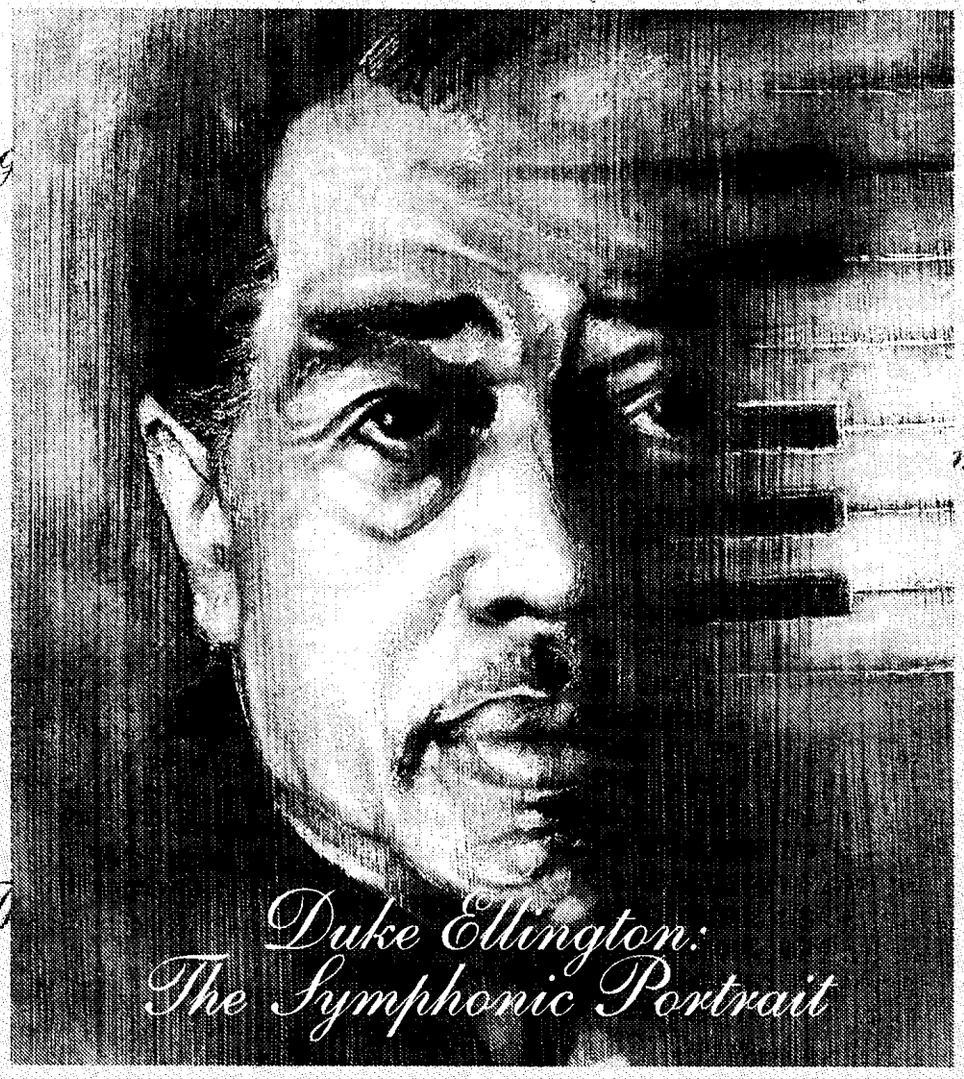
Black, Brown & Beige Suite

New World A-Comin'

Harlem

Three Black Kings

Duke Ellington: Th



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Duke Ellington
THE SYMPHONIC PORTRAIT

The musical legacy of Duke Ellington (1899–1974) stands as a brilliant model of American compositional creativity, and the body of work he has left us reveals an individual driven to pure artistic expression. If one were to consider only his work as a writer and bandleader in the 1920s and '30s, it would be easy to conclude that he had a profound influence on the history of jazz. Yet his mastery extends much farther. Ellington's compositional output consists of concerti, tone poems, film scores, ballets, big band arrangements and several operas. Although an appreciation of his genius can be gleaned from almost every angle, he seemed to reserve his highest creative effort for the extended musical forms of concerti and tone poems. We are pleased to present four of these masterworks that were eventually arranged for the symphony orchestra.

By the early 1940s, Duke Ellington had achieved the status of standard-bearer for the fledgling art form of American jazz. While at the Cotton Club during the '20s and '30s, his original songs, dance tunes and swing charts earned him the title, "master of the short form." In spite of this praise, Ellington suffered from the inexorable yearnings of an artist ready to expand his horizons. His band, which included artists such as Jimmie Blanton, Cootie Williams and Ben Webster, had spent several years recording shorter works amassed over the previous 15 years. While these recordings vastly increased the scope of his popularity, his quest for musical exploration fueled a growing sense of artistic restlessness. Beginning in the 1930s, the thought of a major concert piece lingered in the back of his mind. "I'm going to compose a musical evolution of the Negro race," he told a reporter in 1931. "I've been going to do this for years, but somehow or other I've always kind of put it off."

In 1939, Ellington split with his longtime friend and agent, Irving Mills, and immediately took up with the William Morris Agency in New York. The Morris Agency promoted the Ellington band with fresh vigor, and soon a contract was signed giving Ellington the unprecedented opportunity to present his music in a series of concerts in New York City's majestic Carnegie Hall. This was the catalyst Ellington needed; he decided to premiere his first extended work in his debut concert. In December 1942, he began working on *Black, Brown and Beige: A Tone Parallel* [musical description] *to the History of the Negro in America*, and completed it in approximately six weeks—just in time for his January 23, 1943 debut.

The general reaction to this 48-minute work was one of confusion, primarily because the audience had never heard anything like it before. For the first time, the jazz style was embedded in a classically designed tone poem; therefore, neither the jazz nor the classical music audience was able to comprehend Ellington's revolutionary music. Few understood the work in a single listening; its greatness would be appreciated later on. Although this concert put Ellington on the map as a concert performer, it undoubtedly was a trial by fire of his newly wrought direction. The performance stands as a towering accomplishment, both in view of the risk involved, and the unprecedented appearance of an African-American composer performing in Carnegie Hall.

During the years following the premiere of *Black, Brown and Beige*, Ellington seldom featured the entire work in concert. However, he continued performing parts of it, while tinkering with the greater form. By the time Maurice Peress, the conductor of the American Composers Orchestra, approached Ellington in the late '60s about arranging the piece for full orchestra, it had evolved into a suite consisting of the three major themes from the first movement of the original *Black, Brown and Beige*. **The Black, Brown and Beige Suite** was premiered in 1970 by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Maurice Peress.

The first movement of the suite, subtitled "Work Song," portrays the African-Americans' first 100 years of existence in the United States. The work song motif appears throughout the movement, from the opening trumpet unison, to the growled trombone solo, until a transition is marked by an ethereal alto saxophone refrain. The second movement, subtitled "Come Sunday," is Ellington's reference to the role of the church in the lives of African-Americans as a haven of sanctity and serenity. An "Amen" and an ascending trumpet line heralds the third movement, subtitled "Light." This movement presents a view of mid-20th century life in Harlem, with various themes signifying the hustle and bustle of the city, and a restatement of the "Come Sunday" theme just before the end.

On December 11, 1943, Ellington and his orchestra performed at Carnegie Hall for the second time. Featured on this concert was the critically acclaimed **New World A-Comin'** for piano and jazz band, which was inspired by a book from the pen of prominent African-American author Roi Otteley. Otteley presents a hopeful view of life for African-Americans following World War II. Taking both the title and message of this book to heart, Ellington created a musical portrait of a world where, in his words, "there would be no war, no greed, no categorization, no non-believers, where love was unconditional, and no pronoun was good enough for God." The premiere of **New World A-Comin'** was met with rousing praise for its tonal beauty, sensuous atmosphere, and of course, Ellington's brilliant piano playing.

During the '60s this work resurfaced in a new version for symphony orchestra and piano. The piano part existed only in Ellington's head, and the parts and score are now lost. In the summer of 1983, Maurice Peress reconstructed the original version for piano and jazz band from an earlier recording, including the piano solo played by Ellington. He later adapted this for full symphony orchestra. **New World A-Comin'**, in various forms, kept its place in Ellington's repertoire for the duration of his career. On our recording, Ellington's piano solo is performed beautifully by pianist Master Sergeant Wade Beach Jr.

Perhaps the most significant extended work ever penned by Ellington was the one of which he was most proud. His 1950 masterpiece, **Harlem**, was written as a musical journey, passing various street scenes and ending in a triumphant return to the march for civil rights. Commissioned by Arturo Toscanini, the conductor of the NBC Symphony Orchestra, **Harlem** was composed on Ellington's return from a European tour, with the intent that his band would perform the piece with the orchestra. For unknown reasons, this performance never took place. Ellington went on to record Harlem with his band alone in 1954, performed it with orchestra in Carnegie Hall during the same year, and featured it regularly in the band's performance repertoire.

In **Harlem**, one can hear the evolution of Ellington's style since *Black, Brown and Beige*. This concise, single-movement work can be divided into two parts. The first half is held together by the "Harlem" motive, growled by the trumpet at the start of the piece. The second half evolves from an eight bar blues for three clarinets. The climax of the work clearly unites these separate musical ideas.

Like **Black, Brown and Beige Suite**, and **New World A-Comin'**, **Harlem** is a musical portrayal of the African-American experience. Ellington described the work as follows:

> (1) Pronouncing of the word "Harlem," itemizing its many facets—from downtown to uptown, true and false; (2) 110th Street, heading north through the Spanish neighborhood; (3) Intersection further uptown—cats shucking and stiffing; (4) Upbeat parade; (5) Jazz spoken in a thousand languages; (6) Floor show; (7) Girls out of step, but kicking like crazy; (8) Fanfare for Sunday; (9) On the way to church; (10) Church—we're even represented in Congress by our man of the Church; (11) The sermon; (12) Funeral; (13) Counterpoint of tears; (14) Chic chick; (15) Stopping traffic; (16) After church promenade; (17) Agreement *acappella*; (18) Civil Rights demandments; (19) March onward and upward; (20) Summary—contributions coda.

Throughout the work, the haunting "Harlem" refrain is never more than a couple of bars away.

A few years before Ellington's death, the Dance Theatre of Harlem commissioned him to compose a ballet titled **Three Black Kings**. In 1973, he gave sketches of the main ideas of the piece to Luther Henderson, an orchestrator and arranger who had been a close colleague for many years. After Ellington's death in 1974, his son Mercer finished the piece and asked Henderson to arrange it for big band and orchestra. The version featured on this recording is a revision of Henderson's arrangement.

Each movement of **Three Black Kings** pays tribute to an historical leader of African descent: Balthazaar, King of the Magi; King Solomon, son of King David and Beersheba; and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. While the piece lacks the thematic punch of Ellington's earlier efforts, the structure and layout of the overall work lends itself to a successful transcription for orchestra. It is unknown whether these differences are indicative of the development of the elder Ellington's comfort with the larger ensemble, or of his limited involvement with the piece.

While these selections vary greatly in structure, they share far more than the theme of the composer's African-American heritage. Ellington's visionary compositional style, combined with his discomfort with musical labels such as jazz and classical, resulted in a genre that integrated these distinct styles most effectively. To play this remarkable music requires an ensemble of versatile musicians who could understand and manage the demands of both jazz and classical writing. The unique resources of The United States Air Force Band provide such an ensemble. It is with great pride that we present these musical masterpieces, and offer our own contribution to the legacy of this great American composer.

All works on this recording released by permission of G. Schirmer, Inc.

SELECTIONS

1 | **Black, Brown and Beige Suite** (20:29) — Edward K. Ellington, orchestration by Maurice Peress

Black (A Work Song)
Brown (Come Sunday)
Beige (Light)

2 | **New World A-Comin'** (15:56) — Edward K. Ellington, arranged by Maurice Peress

Master Sergeant Wade Beach Jr., soloist

3 | **Harlem** (16:13) — Edward K. Ellington, orchestration by Luther Henderson & Maurice Peress

4 | **Three Black Kings** (19:37) — Edward K. Ellington, orchestration by Maurice Peress

Part 1 King of the Magi
Part 2 King Solomon
Part 3 Martin Luther King Jr.

PERSONNEL

THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ORCHESTRA

Commander/Conductor – Colonel Lowell E. Graham – Greeley, CO

First Violin

MSgt Dustin Saam** – Glendora, NJ
MSgt Mark Helm – Binghamton, NY
MSgt Jane Bockenek – Washington, DC
TSgt Jessica Dan – Beijing, China
TSgt Deborah Volker – Lansdale, PA
CMSgt David Swanson* – Portland, OR

Second Violin

TSgt William Tortolano* – Underhill, VT
MSgt Alexander Dean – Dayton, OH
TSgt Serge Rizov – New York, NY
TSgt Cleveland Chandler – Baltimore, MD
MSgt Timothy Kidder – Lake Worth, FL

Viola

MSgt Paul Swantek* – Plymouth, MI
MSgt Sharon Bingham – Washington, DC
MSgt Judith Thompson – San Antonio, TX
MSgt Donald Harrington – Elmira, NY

Cello

MSgt Christopher Moehlenkamp* – Lynchburg, VA
TSgt Joan Hovda – Decorah, IA
TSgt C. Franklin McKinster – Arnold, MD
TSgt Erin Eyles – Springfield, VA

String Bass

SMSgt Karl Heikkinen* – Gettysburg, PA
MSgt Frank Pappajohn – Morgantown, WV
MSgt William Hones – Toledo, OH
MSgt Paul Henry, electric bass – Green Bay, WI

Piccolo

MSgt Ardyth Scott – Shreveport, LA

Flute

MSgt Lawrence Ink* – Rockville, MD
MSgt Lucille Johnston Snell – Albuquerque, NM

Oboe

MSgt Ronald Erler* – Falls Church, VA
CMSgt Robin Forrester-Meadows – Evansville, IN

English Horn

CMSgt James Moseley – Beaumont, TX

Clarinet

CMSgt Steven Lawson* – Simi Valley, CA
MSgt Elizabeth Campeau – Pinckney, MI

Bass Clarinet

TSgt Jeffrey Snavely – Milwaukee, WI

Bassoon
CMSgt Danny Phipps* – Annapolis, MD
MSgt Gregory Brown – Mesa, AZ

Contra-Bassoon
MSgt Joe Tersero – Killeen, TX

Saxophone
SMSgt Joe Eckert, alto – Cleveland, OH
TSgt Andy Axelrad, alto – Buffalo Grove, IL
CMSgt Peter BarenBregge, tenor – Wilmington, DE
MSgt Saul Miller Jr. tenor – Riverside, CA
MSgt Don New, baritone – Levittown, PA

French Horn
TSgt Deborah Stephenson* – Dallas, TX
TSgt Philip Krzywicki – Philadelphia, PA
TSgt Leslie Mincer – Charlottesville, VA
TSgt Kent Wyatt – Arlington, TX

Trumpet
MSgt Bruce Gates, lead – Geneva, IL
MSgt Dave Detwiler, assistant lead*** – Altoona, PA
TSgt Tim Leahey – Altoona, PA
TSgt Rich Sigler – Mountain View, CA
MSgt James Bittner – Harrisburg, PA

Trombone
MSgt Joe Jackson, lead – Denton, TX
TSgt Jeff Martin – Newton, KS
TSgt Ben Patterson – Sipola, OK

Bass Trombone
MSgt Dudley Hinote – Titusville, FL

Tuba
MSgt William Porter II – Alcoa, TN

Timpani
MSgt Patrick Shrieves – Freehold, NJ

Percussion
SMSgt Mark Carson – East Fultonham, OH
TSgt Erica Kadison – Lousiville, KY

Drum Set
SMSgt C.E. Askew – Stuttgart, AR

Harp
TSgt Eric Sabatino – Long Island City, NY

Guitar
TSgt Shawn Purcell – Pittsburgh, PA

Piano
MSgt Wade Beach Jr. – Baltimore, MD

*Principal
**ConcertMaster
***member, The U.S. Army Band Washington, D.C.

CREDITS

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For information about The United States Air Force Band and its components, or to receive its newsletter, contact Director of Public Affairs, The United States Air Force Band, 201 McChord Street, Bolling Air Force Base, Washington, D.C. 20332-0202.

The United States Air Force Band Home Page is available on the World Wide Web at:

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orchestration by Maurice Peress

TOTAL TIME 72:17