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CULTURAL COMMENTARY

Two Ellington Anniversaries

Two of Duke Ellington's landmark works celebrate jubilees this month: his 1943 'Black, Brown, and Beige: A Tone Parallel to the History of the Negro in America' and 1968 'Second Sacred Concert.'

By *John Edward Hasse*

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Duke Ellington in 1963 PHOTO: HULTON-DEUTSCH/GETTY IMAGES

Duke Ellington (1899-1974) was always pushing against conventions and limits, creating an enormous, innovative and nonpareil body of compositions and recordings that still hold wonders for the listener. He treated his band's rehearsals as a musical laboratory, experimenting with new harmonies, timbres and instrumental voicings. Like a magisterial chef, he alchemized his ingredients—the signature styles of his musicians—into a whole that was greater than the sum of its parts.

Ellington hated being pigeon-holed as strictly a jazz musician. He was, in fact, in a phrase he favored, “beyond category.” Over his astonishingly productive 50-year career leading the Duke Ellington Orchestra, he composed songs, short instrumentals, multi-movement suites, scores for ballets and motion pictures, and Broadway-bound musicals. He was mostly known as a miniaturist for his three-minute evergreens such as “Mood Indigo,” “Sophisticated Lady,” and “Satin Doll.” But his lesser-known, large-scale works provided him the canvases to tell bigger stories, inspired by, among other topics, African-American history and his reverence for God. Those themes inform two of his landmark works whose jubilees occur this month.

Seventy-five years ago, he made a much-publicized debut at Carnegie Hall, enlarging his place in the soundscape beyond ballrooms, nightclubs and theater stages. The highlight of that concert on Jan. 23, 1943, was his 45-minute magnum opus “Black, Brown, and Beige: A Tone Parallel to the History of the Negro in America.” “BB&B,” which finally came out on disc in 1977, evidenced the composer’s profound pride in African-American history and his intent to express “an authentic record of my race written by a member of it.”

With little experience writing long forms, Ellington struggled with continuity, transitions and the ending, yet “BB&B” is a seminal work. Its three movements—“Black,” “Brown,” and “Beige”—move from the Revolutionary War period to the mid-20th century. Its most memorable sections are “The Blues” (sung by Betty Roché), “Emancipation Celebration” and “Come Sunday.” One of Ellington’s most ravishing melodies, the ethereal, devotional “Come Sunday” is played luminously on the recording by alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges, who wrings from each phrase every nuance of tender and reverential feeling, drawing instant, awed applause from the audience.

Ellington kept his spirituality largely to himself, but in the 1960s, facing the illness and death of longtime collaborator Billy Strayhorn and thus his own mortality, he began writing “Sacred



A poster advertising Duke Ellington's 1943 Carnegie Hall debut PHOTO: CARNEGIE HALL ARCHIVES

Concerts.” The first had its premiere in 1965 at San Francisco’s Grace Cathedral. The “Second Sacred Concert” had its debut at New York’s Cathedral of St. John the Divine on Jan. 19, 1968, to an audience of 6,000 and was soon recorded for release later that year.

“I regard this concert,” Ellington wrote in 1973, “as the most important thing I have ever done,” and he paid for its subsequent recording. Though marred by his

sincere but inelegant lyrics—“Freedom, Freedom must be won / ‘Cause Freedom’s even good fun”—the work was generally very well received; Down Beat magazine gave the recording “all the stars in God’s heaven.” Ellington presented it across the U.S. and Europe.



Duke Ellington conducts his 1968 ‘Second Sacred Concert’ at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

Freedom is a major theme; the movement “It’s Freedom” explores the word in different pitches and languages. In free rhythm, then bossa nova rhythm, “Heaven” is sung by the magnificent Swedish coloratura soprano Alice Babs, whose angelic, clear voice could soar into the highest spires of any cathedral. Beginning sparsely and building in volume, “Almighty God” spotlights bass, clarinet and Babs’s voice. Cootie Williams “talks” and growls his trumpet masterfully through “The Shepherd (Who Watches Over the Night Flock).” “T.G.T.T. (Too Good to Title)” has Ellington atypically playing a dulcet electric piano, accompanying Babs in a wordless vocal, with a melody that goes up and down, from earth to heaven, and ends in the Celestial City. The concert climaxes in “Praise God and Dance,” with words drawn from Psalm 150.

Both “BB&B” and the “Second Sacred Concert” have taken their places not only as milestones in Ellington’s artistic career, but as classics of American music. The premiere performance of “BB&B” is included in “The Duke Ellington Carnegie Hall Concerts, January 1943” (Prestige). Ellington’s 1958 streamlined “BB&B” with the eminent gospel singer Mahalia Jackson is on Columbia, while a 1965 version of “BB&B” highlights is on “The Private Collection, Volume Ten”

(Saja). Prestige issued Ellington's "Second Sacred Concert." Parts of it are widely performed in the U.S. and abroad.

On April 26-28, the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, led by Wynton Marsalis, will perform "BB&B." Also this spring, Jazz Lines Publications will issue a complete edition, over 200 pages long, of "BB&B," which should stimulate performances in the U.S. and abroad. The public can hope to hear these remarkable works presented more often in the future.

—*Mr. Hasse, curator emeritus of American music at the Smithsonian Institution, is author of "Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington" (Da Capo).*

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