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Great Times in Ottawa: Impressions In Jazz Orchestra and Ducal Music

by Lois Moody

Now in its fifth year, the Impressions in Jazz Orchestra (IJO) continues to give Ottawa, Canada, one of its best opportunities to experience both established and contemporary works from masters of both composing and arranging. From the IJO's outset in 2005, Ellington and Strayhorn have been highlighted.

Their 16 April program, *Masterpieces: Ellington & Peaslee*, was a revelation, since Peaslee's name is virtually unknown to audiences raised on Ducal traditions, but the logic of the pairing was soon evident. Both men share gifts for evocative themes, rich tone colors, surprising effects, and imaginative use of instrumentation. Both capitalized on ensemble and solo strengths.

Seattle-based Richard Peaslee's versatility has found outlets in both jazz and classical concerts, as well as music for film, theatre, dance, and television. The pieces for this Ottawa program, *Nightsongs* and the four-movement *Chicago Concerto* (originally written for Gerry Mulligan), showcased this diversity and gave the orchestra a challenge it met with flair. Filling the Mulligan role admirably was Mike Tremblay on baritone.

The evening's centrepiece, however, was Ellington's *Far East Suite*, with Adrian Cho—the IJO's founder/leader/arranger/bassist—offering well-researched, brief remarks on the *Suite's* origins. Without duplicating either style or solo content, some of the IJO's key members nevertheless did credit to the memories and accomplishments of several Ellington stars. The entire *Suite* was an inspiring ride back into jazz history.

To whet the appetite for coming events, we were also treated to Duke's "Jungle Nights in Harlem" and "The Shepherd," along with the Charles Mingus/Joni Mitchell collaboration on "Goodbye, Pork Pie Hat." We look forward to *Ellington: From Cotton Club to Concert Hall* on 4 September, a career-spanning retrospective. On 30 October comes *When Joni Met Mingus*, a 30th anniversary celebration of the recording session with Mingus and lyricist Mitchell, released posthumously as *Mingus*. Guest vocalist (as for the

Program for June Meeting: Alumni Continuum

Almost immediately after Duke Ellington's funeral the orchestra, essentially intact, was on the road under the leadership of Mercer Ellington. In the subsequent years any number of those who had been members of the orchestra actually led by "the maestro" continued their music careers. Names such as Norris Turney, Art Baron, Barrie Lee Hall, Jr., Alice Babs, Nelson "Cadillac" Williams, Booty Wood, Herb Jeffries (still at it at age 97!) come to mind. Surely you can think of more.

So here's where you fit in: At our June meeting, Ted Hudson will present a program of music by alumni in recorded performances since Duke's passing. While this will be Ted's program, as it were, it is as well a Member's Choice event in which you are urged to participate. The criteria: the artist you select must have been a member of the band led by Duke himself, has recorded post-Duke as a side-man or featured artist or leader or single. Just bring your choice/s to the meeting and you will have a chance to share at least one.

It will all take place at 7:00 pm, Saturday, 6 June at our usual meeting place, **Grace Lutheran Church, 16th and Varnum Streets, NW, Washington, DC**. Our meetings are free and open to the public, so visitors are welcome.

'A' Train Riders Treated to Music On 110th Anniversary of Duke's Birth

Directed by his grandson Paul Mercer Ellington, on 29 April the Ellington Orchestra performed on the con-course at the 125th Street subway station and then, sans piano, boarded an 'A' Train of period coaches and serenaded passengers with an impromptu moving concert. After all, it was the 110th anniversary of Duke's birthday!

April concert) will be Ottawa's Christine Fagan. The IJO's 2009-10 season ends on 27 March with *Ellington: The Sacred Concerts*, which will draw from all three of Duke's major sacred works and involve guest soloists and a jazz choir.

These are great times for music in our capital.

Ed. Note: We thank our member Lois Moody for sharing this information with our readers.

Ellington Uptown: Duke Ellington, James P. Johnson, and the Birth of Concert Jazz

by John Howland

Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009

Reviewed by Theodore R. Hudson

John Howland is to be congratulated and thanked, for this is an important book on a subject that, as far as we know, has never been formally explored before.

Using selected works by Duke Ellington and James P. Johnson, he seeks to describe a then new music that still resists categorization. This is an enviable task, considering that a definition of “jazz” has not yet crystalized (and considering what Ellington said about the term and what Louis Armstrong replied when asked what jazz is, “If you have to ask . . .”). Wisely, the author early on considers available music taxonomy, if you will, discussing relevant terms such as “jazz,” “symphony,” “classical,” “serious,” “folk,” “high,” “low,” and “middlebrow,” the process leading to his designating what he is talking about as “concert jazz,” or less frequently and more narrowly as “symphonic jazz.” Throughout, graphs, charts, excerpts from scores, and other graphics usefully illustrate the author’s technical points and analyses. The book can be appreciated by the lay reader, though, without fully understanding these aids. A “Conclusion” helps the reader synthesize the analyses and plentiful information that the book as a whole offers; considering its density of information that we mention below, perhaps it would be useful to read this conclusion first.

Ellington Uptown is scholarly, well informed, and well documented. Even so, we feel obliged to make several observations: It is not a “fast read,” for its prose style is dense with details, so much so that the reader may want to put the book down from time to time, re-read a passage, or simply think about what he or she has read. Given the book’s overall high quality and topical richness—definitions, concepts, themes, theories, events—the index is a tad disappointing, at least to this reader, in that except for those topics under the names of Ellington and Johnson, it lists mostly the names of persons and titles of music and relatively too few topics. One last little quibble: a discography of available illustrative recordings would have been valuable.

Howland reminds us that Ellington’s and Johnson’s early compositions longer than dance and tin-pan-alley types were for vaudevillian, stage, and floor shows. Before their “concert jazz” pieces came into being, other extended jazz-oriented works were pretty much associated with the likes of George Gershwin, Paul Whiteman, and, yes, Aaron Copeland, all of whom Howland discusses in his analyses and exposition.

Important as mentors and role models to both Ellington and Johnson during their formative years were several trained black forerunners who had attained some success in formal popular music (that is, not “real” jazz), prominent among them Will Vodery, Will Marion Cook, and James Reese Europe. Johnson’s setting was musical theater, and he had an interest in conventional concert music. By contrast, from his beginnings Ellington’s setting was with a popular band. But there is no hard evidence that he had a strong interest in classical music; he was, though, a self-styled, to use his own term, “great listener.” Further, for Ellington the terms “serious” and “classical” were not coterminous.

Our guess is that few current-day jazz devotees are familiar with the compositions of “stride pianist” Johnson beyond “Carolina Shout,” “The Charleston,” and possibly *Yamekraw*. *Ellington Uptown* is a welcome corrective, revealing a wider world of an ambitious and talented composer and musician. During his pre-1950s era, Johnson paid less attention to popular music of the day and more to concert music, still jazz oriented and “racially themed.” Howland points out that as early as the 1930s Johnson had turned his efforts toward “symphonic jazz.” An artistic challenge for him was how to embody a peoples jazz in “serious” or “legitimate” music.

The premiere performance of Johnson’s *Harlem Symphony* in 1937 met with welcoming approval if not with wide critical acclaim. (Indirectly, it led to the founding of the New York Negro Symphony Orchestra.) Its four movements were intended to evoke a subway ride through ethnic neighborhoods to Harlem. Later, in collaboration with poet Langston Hughes, he began an opera that never was completed. However, the two did get together later on a “blues opera,” *De Organizer*, that resulted in a 1940 performance. Among his “concert jazz” compositions are *Victory Stride*, *Symphony in Brown*, *American Symphony Suite*, and *Manhattan Street Scene*. But *Yamekraw*, it seems, may have been Johnson’s capping achievement in this new music. Howland dedicates a full chapter to this once piano solo piece *Yamekraw* that became an orchestral piece, *Yamekraw: A Negro Rhapsody*. To him, “the history of *Yamekraw* illuminates the complex contemporary interactions between class politics, artful entertainment traditions, middlebrow efforts at cultural democratization, and the cross-cultural impact of the variety entertainment model.”

Professor Howland examines a chronology of Ellington compositions, among them *Symphony in Black* (“best viewed as a bridge between, on one hand, the aesthetic and cultural interests of 1920s Harlem revues, and on the other, Ellington’s concert works of the 1940s”), the two recorded versions of *Creole Rhapsody* (“landmark events in Ellington’s aspirations to compose in ‘extended’ forms”), *Reminiscing in Tempo* (“Ellington’s first transformation of symphonic jazz episodic form”), *Black, Brown and Beige* (“an extension of Ellington’s previous experiments with ‘motivic saturation’ and the ‘development idea’”), and *New World A-Comin’* (“sought to portray the social and cultural riches of Harlem”). As concert jazz, Howland is more enthusiastic

(Continued on page 3 under “Concert Jazz”)

Short Sheets . . .

♪ New CDs ♪

We hope to review two new-to-us CDs from Black and Blue Records: *Cat Anderson Plays W.C. Handy* and *Booty Wood: Chelsea Bridge*.

♪ Congress Pays Tribute to Willis Conover ♪

Fittingly during Jazz Appreciation Month, the US Congress proclaimed 25 April as “Willis Conover Day.” The famed Voice of America broadcaster is credited with introducing jazz to listeners worldwide, of particular importance those behind the so-called Iron Curtain after World War II.

♪ Diva in Sacred Concert ♪

As part of her “Honor! A Celebration of the African American Cultural Legacy” series, Jessye Norman in March at St. John the Divine in NYC presented a concert of music from Duke’s Sacred Concerts.

Oh, No! Clinkers!

Shamefacedly, we offer apologies for typos in our May issue. We won’t repeat the mistakes found in the “Favorite Late 1920s Recordings” article, only say that the following are correct spellings: “The Mooche,” “Doin’ the Voom Voom,” and “Birmingham Break-down.”

Editor’s lame explanation: We were honoring Duke’s 1941 composition “Concerto for Clinkers.” [Yeah, right.]

1934 Foresight < - - - > 2009 Hindsight

Ellington’s best works are written in what may be called ten-inch record form, and he is perhaps the only composer to raise this insignificant disc to the dignity of a definite genre. Into this three and a half minutes he compresses the utmost, but beyond its limits he is inclined to fumble. . . . Ellington has shown no sign of expanding his formal conceptions, and perhaps it is as well, for his works might then lose their peculiar concentrated savour. He is definitely a petit maitre, but that, after all, is considerably more than many people thought either jazz or the coloured race would ever produce.

– Constant Lambert in his 1934 Music Ho! as quoted by Vic Bellerby in “Recollections Number 2,” Blue Light, April-June 2001

Concert Jazz

(Continued from page 2)

about Ellington’s post-1950s works. To him *A Tone Parallel Harlem* (aka popularly known simply as *Harlem*) is “a masterly, fourteen-minute work that is the apogee of Ellington’s mature, post-symphonic-jazz conception for external form, and Ellington’s richest exploration of thematic development” and “a high point in both Ellington’s extended compositions and his lifelong celebration of the rich community of Harlem.”

This book notably shows extra-music confluences that made “concert jazz” possible, or shall we venture, inevitable. As much as were the technical trends and fashions in the music of the day, it seems at least to this reader that these confluences were catalysts that energized Duke Ellington’s and James P. Johnson’s extraordinarily creative muses.

Ellington Uptown: Duke Ellington, James P. Johnson, and the Birth of Concert Jazz is an important ground-breaking study that can be an expository read, a reference work, a listener’s guide, and a study guide.

Treat yourself to a copy.

Ellington’s *Queenie Pie* Staged At Echoes of Ellington Conference

“In the eclectic way of its composer, Ellington’s opera [*Queenie Pie*] is all over the map: comic, tragic, real, magical; big-band swing, blues, calypso—an exuberant gumbo of musical and dramatic styles . . .” according to an article in the Austin, Texas *Chronicle*.

The show was part of the Echoes of Ellington Conference in April sponsored by the University of Texas at Austin and its Butler School of Music.

Ellington did not complete *Queenie Pie*, leaving its future producers and composers to interpret and “finish” the work according to their conceptions of his intentions, Mercer Ellington and Maurice Peress among them. This latest version depended heavily upon faculty members and others at Butler for tunes, arrangements, lyrics, and staging that considered previous versions.

Ed. Note: We have not been able to find major print- and aired-media reportage or reviews of the conference day sessions of speeches and papers by participants.

MyHelsinki: 12 Helsinki Stories

Last month we reported that Davey Yarborough was one of twelve cultural artists who had been guests of the Helsinki Cultural Program, each of whom had a different schedule and activities that provided both personal and professional experiences. An official announcement by the Embassy of Finland states that “This spring, 12 talented Washingtonians traveled by invitation to Helsinki on individual journeys, hosted by their Helsinki counterparts . . . We welcome you to take part in these journeys.” As such, the Embassy in Washington, DC is holding a *MyHelsinki* exhibition and series of events highlighting the cultural, educational, environmental, and other experiences of the cool Nordic capital.

The Embassy’s Finland Hall will be transformed into the city discovered through the eyes of the twelve Americans from their interests and unique perspectives. The exhibit offers authentic Finnish foods, and especially for children, a tram ride, treasure hunt, and more.

MyHelsinki is open Friday to Sunday, 2-31 May, 11 am to 4 pm at the Embassy, 3301 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington, DC.

For accounts by and photographs of Davey Yarborough and the 11 other visitors and their hosts, go online to myhelsinki.fi/journals or to www.finland.org and follow the links.

Tony Bennett Donates His Portrait Of Duke Ellington to Smithsonian

In a ceremony on 29 April in celebration of Duke Ellington's 110th birthday, Tony Bennett donated his portrait of Ellington to the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC. The painting will hang in the New Arrivals gallery through Labor Day.

The watercolor depicts Ellington and a background of pink roses, a reference, says Bennett, to Duke's habit of sending a dozen roses whenever he had a new song for Tony to sing. Inscribed are the words "God Is Love."

This is the third that Bennett, a lifelong painter, has donated to the Smithsonian, the others being a rendering of Central Park and a portrait of Ella Fitzgerald.

On hand for the celebration were Davey Yarborough and a student group from the Ellington School of the Arts who played compositions by Ellington and the theme song, Billy Strayhorn's "Take the 'A' Train."

If you want to see an image of the Ellington portrait, photographs of the ceremony, and an account of the ceremony as well, go to the Smithsonian Web site and use the search facility.

5th Annual Ellington Jazz Festival Will Celebrate New Orleans

Prominent among featured artists for this year's Duke Ellington Jazz Festival will be New Orleans-associated musicians Harry Connick, Jr., Terence Blanchard, Buckwheat Zydeco, and the Marsalis family. The Duke Ellington Orchestra, which performed at last year's festival, will appear again this year.

The Washington, DC area event will run 5-15 June and will have a notable number of free performances, including two "Jazz 'n Families Fun Days," three "Jazz on the National Mall" concerts, and student concerts and master classes.

Among other attractions will be a Gala Concert at the French Embassy presenting Dr. Michael White and the Original Liberty Jazz Band and a closing "DEJF Jazz Master's Concert" at the Kennedy Center honoring Ellis Marsalis. For a schedule and other information, go online to: www.dejazzfest.org

Familiar and Rare Videos Delight at Our May Meeting

by Art Luby, Secretary

The May meeting of our Society featured a presentation of Ellington and Ellington related videos. The look of the Ellington Orchestra was always one of the interesting features of any Ellington performance, and I am sure the videos refreshed many a recollection of Johnny Hodges' impassive countenance and Ray Nance's jivey presentation. However, we also saw live action of many legendary musicians whom I had never actually seen play, including Trick Sam Nanton and the powerful trumpeter Rex Stewart.

Many of the videos were well known, such as the film of Ben Webster taking his famous choruses on "Cotton Tail," as well as the tape of Duke's appearance at the White House in 1969 and his moving tribute to the four freedoms by which the late Billy Strayhorn lived. It was, though, a happy coincidence that this latter tape included footage of our member Carole Mumin, on the White House staff at the time, dancing with Duke.

However, Peter also had several "finds." The first was an extraordinary performance of "Ebony Rhapsody" from the long forgotten movie *Murder at the Vanities*, in which the Duke's men out-blow the stage orchestra before their performance is terminated by what appeared to be the mass murder of the chorus line. The second was an Ellington related tape of a performance by Jimmy Witherspoon and Ben Webster moderated by Ralph Gleason, with Webster's broad bluesy tone on full display near the end of his life. Also on display was Gleason's spare interview style that maximized the opportunity to hear Witherspoon describe his background and development as a singer.

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