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| Ellington, Duke (1899 – 1974) |
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| Duke Ellington was an American jazz composer, pianist, and big-band leader who authored over 1000 compositions throughout his career. He recorded full length studio albums in quartet and trio settings with high modernists John Coltrane and Charles Mingus, and became one of the leading musical figures in the Harlem Renaissance. Giddins and DeVeaux (2009) argue that Ellington’s compositions have been the most performed pieces in jazz written by any one composer. |
| Duke Ellington was born Edward Kennedy Ellington on the 29th of April, 1899, in Washington D.C. Having studied piano since the age of seven, Ellington relocated to New York City as part of the Great Migration and became a prominent musical figure in the Harlem Renaissance. Throughout the 1920s, Ellington and his orchestra held a performance engagement at the notable Cotton Club in Harlem, and began to record music midway through the decade. Some of his most influential compositions written in the Jazz Age of the 1920s include the ballads “Mood Indigo,” “Sophisticated Lady,” and “In a Sentimental Mood.” Ellington’s composition “Black and Tan Fantasy” (1929) formed the basis of a short film of the same title, and was accompanied there by actors, dancers, and artists. The film, which featured Ellington’s orchestra in performance at the Cotton Club, came to characterize the Harlem Renaissance and its contributions to the visual and performing arts. His 1931 up-tempo composition “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)” became a popular piece for big bands during the Swing Jazz movement of the 1930s. In 1943, Ellington composed *Black, Brown and Beige* for his first performance at Carnegie Hall. *Black* was a modernist musical work that engaged civil rights activism and the mid twentieth century African American experience.  Ellington maintained a partnership with arranger Billy Strayhorn that lasted three decades and generated a vast body of orchestral work, including “Take the ‘A’ Train,” all of which was distinctly modernist in its jazz-orientation. Ellington composed the soundtrack to a film in France and became a cultural ambassador of America’s modern music, travelling overseas extensively with his Orchestra where he diplomatically promoted jazz in regions such as Soviet Russia during the Cold War. He partnered with international figures in modern music such as Juan Tizol to perform the jazz composition “Caravan,” which he recorded with his orchestra, featuring a distinctly Mediterranean melody. He died on May 24, 1974 in New York City, at age 75. Ellington was posthumously awarded a Pulitzer Prize Special Citation on the centennial of his birth in 1999, recognizing his musical genius, his evocation of the principles of democracy through jazz, and for his significant contributions to modern culture and the arts.  (Giddins) |
| Further reading:  (Appel)  (Dance)  (Edwards)  (Ellington)  (Gleason)  (Hasse)  (Lambert)  (Lawrence)  (Lincoln)  (Nicholson)  (Schiff)  (Steed)  (Timner)  (Tucker)  (Tucker, Ellington: The Early Years) |