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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. 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. He recorded full-length studio albums in quartet and trio settings with high modernists John Coltrane and Charles Mingus. Ellington was posthumously awarded a Pulitzer Prize Special Citation on the centennial of his birth in 1999, recognising his musical genius, his evocation of the principles of democracy through jazz, and his significant contributions to modern culture and the arts. 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 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. In his youth, Ellington is said to have practiced the piano rolls of Harlem stride innovator James P. Johnson. He formed his first professional band in 1919. 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. Ellington’s performances at the Cotton Club were nationally broadcast on the radio, allowing him to earn a wider reputation then other jazz musicians of his era. Prior to the Cotton Club in Harlem, Ellington’s orchestra had an extended engagement at the Kentucky Club. Ellington and his Kentucky Club Orchestra had their first recording session in November of 1926. Some of Ellington’s most influential compositions written in the Jazz Age of the 1920s include the ballads ‘Mood Indigo’ (first recorded in October of 1930), ‘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, in which he was accompanied by actors, dancers, and artists. The film, which featured Ellington’s orchestra in performance at the Cotton Club, came to characterise the Harlem Renaissance and its contributions to the visual and performing arts. Ellington’s 1920s work has been characterised as Afro-Modernism by cultural commentators and music historians, and it has been claimed to have comprised part of the New Negro Project of redefining the black experience in American life among the migration of the rural south to the urban north (Magee, 2015). 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. Ellington left his engagement at the Cotton Club that year. The Ellington Orchestra’s first extended national tour took place in the same year. His orchestra’s first European tour took place in 1933. 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. Accordingly, Ellington subtitled the work *A Tone Parallel to the History of the Negro in America*. Ellington’s orchestra featured some of the leading instrumentalists in jazz, including Johnny Hodges on alto saxophone and Ben Webster on tenor saxophone. The Liberian government asked Ellington to compose music for the 100th anniversary of their independence, and as a result Ellington composed a suite that he premiered at his Carnegie Hall concert of 1947. Ellington experienced a short decline in his career in post-World World II America, but renewed himself at the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival in Rhode Island, which was followed by frequent trips to Europe to play engagements there with his orchestra, including other noted jazz festivals. Ellington’s Newport Jazz Festival performance from 1956 was recorded and released as an album, becoming one of his highest selling releases.  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. One of his most extensive U.S. State Department Tours took place in 1963. These extended State Department Tours lasted through the 1970s. Nationally, the Ellington Orchestra played a noted concert at the White House in Washington, D.C. in April of 1969. Globally, Ellington partnered with international figures in modern music such as Juan Tizol to perform the jazz composition ‘Caravan,’ which he recorded with his orchestra; it featured a distinctly Mediterranean melody. Ellington 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, recognising his musical genius, his evocation of the principles of democracy through jazz, and his significant contributions to modern culture and the arts. |
| Further reading:  (Appel)  (Dance)  (Edwards)  (Ellington)  (Giddins)  (Gleason)  (Hasse)  (Lambert)  (Lawrence)  (Lincoln)  Magee, Jeffrey. “Ellington’s Afro-Modernist vision in the 1920s,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Duke Ellington*, edited by Edward Green (pp. 85-105). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.  (Nicholson)  (Schiff)  (Steed)  (Timner)  (Tucker, The Duke Ellington Reader)  (Tucker, Ellington: The Early Years) |