14 Duke and descriptive music

MARCELLO PIRAS

Painter to composer

Like most children, Edward Ellington showed little enthusiasm for piano exercises. He dreamed to be a painter; he even showed early signs of talent in the field. Then, one night at a party, he discovered that the pianist drew the girls' attention, and soon found piano practicing worth the effort. He learned to play, read, and write music, and eventually acquired enough command of the keyboard to perform intricate rags. Music became his profession; art was seemingly downgraded to hobby.

As a matter of fact, Ellington was one of those rare birds endowed with multiple gifts. He also proved a fertile narrator. He was an endless source of short stories, fables, and funny moral tales, sometimes set to music in later years (e.g., *Monologue*, 1951). His mind was busy watching, describing, and depicting all the time.

Ironically, composing music turned out to be the toughest task. In his early years, what he had was a miniature band made up of friends, plus some talent for business, but little compositional skill. His earliest pieces (such as *Soda Fountain Rag*, from 1914), mostly surviving as fragments from later recordings, show that Duke could passably ape current fads. His first records are also surprisingly unpleasant. Instrumental parts overlap and clash; naïve sound effects are interspersed. *Choo Choo* and *Wanna Go Back Again Blues* contain train whistle imitations, hardly an original idea back then.

Listeners familiar with Ellington's full-fledged masterpieces and their rich tonal palette, lush, sensuous melodies, and daring harmonies may expect to find signs of gradual growth across the body of his work. Surprisingly, those ugly early records and Duke's first acknowledged masterpiece, *East St. Louis Toodle-O*, are separated by a mere five months. What had happened?

By 1924–1925, Ellington began taking lessons from a composer of stature, Will Marion Cook (1869–1944). A seminal figure in the development of black music in the U.S.A., Cook had studied in Berlin, been a protégé of Antonín Dvořák at the New York Conservatory, and written theatrical plays – not operas, but classy musical comedies. He furnished Ellington with a legitimate composer's basic vocabulary. Also, he knew

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how to write music for the theater, connected to the plot by commenting, describing, or suggesting events, characters, environments, moods. Some time later, Will Vodery (1885–1951), an authority on Broadway, began teaching Duke orchestration and advanced harmony.

Being an eclectic talent, Ellington was a natural candidate for musical theater, a verbal/visual/musical medium. Moreover, as a pianist, he was a geographically peripheral offspring of that Northern ragtime school whose leading figures – Eubie Blake, James P. Johnson, Thomas Waller – were virtuoso pianists who also wrote show music. As early as 1925, Duke tried his hand at it. Not only did he write songs for a revue that toured Europe, *Chocolate Kiddies* – he began going to theater as often as he could, following rehearsals, watching productions. Once he declared: "I am a man of the theater."[1]

Theatrical success always escaped him, at least in theaters. Despite box office failures, however, Duke's output includes three incomplete operas, eleven musical comedies, six revues, five ballets, incidental music for six plays, and four pieces with narrator, plus eleven movie soundtracks.[2] Even more interestingly, he conceived much of his "pure" instrumental music as synesthetic fusion of image and sound.

Except for a few cases, such as train imitations, Ellington did not do so to make his music easier. Songs are his easy music. Descriptive pieces often rank among his most enigmatic creatures, especially when Duke himself gave no clue. Yet, missing such extramusical elements he associated with his compositions amounts to a vital loss in the appreciation of his art.

Sound to image

Music is fundamentally an abstract art. Its easiest link to the physical world is onomatopoeia, which has been in use since the Stone Age. Keyboard pieces such as William Byrd's *The Battle* often hosted imitation of rattling drums, anthems, or cannonades. Music based on bird calls is also common in many cultures.

Within a more sophisticated approach, music can describe, suggest, or evoke external reality by analogy. In a renaissance madrigal, "rise" could be suggested by an upward scale, "trembling" by a trill. This is fairly direct. But when the idea of "white" is suggested by whole notes and half notes, and "black" by quarter notes and eighth notes, the link escapes the attention of everyone but the music reader.

Opera, born around 1600, inherited some of those usages. It soon hosted descriptive devices, which developed over time into a panoply of recurring musical symbols. For instance, a storm was depicted by a fast

orchestral episode with frantic string tremolos and chromatic scales running up and down. This topos survived into the twentieth century; it is still found in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*.

By 1760, onomatopoeia had almost disappeared from European keyboard music, yet it crossed the ocean and found a haven in the English colonies, where local audiences, untrained in the intricacies of sonata form, welcomed naïve sound effects they "understood." Catalogs of North American composers, from Benjamin Carr onward, list dozens of battles, bird calls, wind- and water-inspired pieces. By 1850, Europe saw Liszt's invention of the tone poem, an orchestral piece following a detailed literary program. In the U.S.A., John Philip Sousa conceived entire suites, such as *Dwellers of the Western World* (1910), as fragmented tone poems for which he wrote down a story. With the surviving onomatopoeic tradition and the new tone-poem vogue overlapping, descriptivism became a staple of American Romantic music.

Nobody was to commission a tone poem from the young Duke. But he was rooted in ragtime, where descriptivism was common fare – water imagery, for instance, from Joplin's *The Cascades* to Luckey Roberts's *Ripples of the Nile* to Gershwin's *Rialto Ripples*. Duke's early solo-piano piece *Swampy River* (1928), an entirely notated irregular rag, forms his contribution to the genre. It springs in terse ripples to a lively Charleston rhythm (A section); gets broader as it flows, in a mix of Cuban *danza* and Harlem stride bass (B), with an occasional vortex (release of B); forms new ripples (A); calms down in the swamps of an Alberti bass (C), with its little cascade (release of C); then resumes its main course (B), to make its final effluence into the sea (the closing *rallentando*).

Rags to Cotton (Club)

From 1923 to 1927, Duke's home base was a cabaret known as Club Kentucky. Its Lilliputian stage hosted floorshows with singers, entertainers, and dance numbers, all backed by the house band. When Duke's Washingtonians were not there, they were usually booked to appear in musical comedies in nearby theaters.

Working for floorshows must have encouraged Duke to shape his pieces around a story. Certainly he did so in later years. In 1966, he was interviewed at home and asked about his working methods; Duke, lying in bed in his pajamas, said that sometimes a story came to his mind and then he worked on it.[3]

As he said in retrospect, "Painting a picture, or having a story to go with what you were going to play, was of vital importance in those days. The

audience didn't know anything about it, but the cats in the band did."[4] He also explained the title of *East St. Louis Toodle-O* (1926): "Those old Negroes who work in the fields for year upon year, and are tired at the end of their day's labour, may be seen walking home at night with a broken, limping step locally known as the 'toddle-O'."[5] All this looks more like a vague inspiration than truly descriptive music, yet it is revealing of Duke's mentality. About *Immigration Blues* (1926), one scholar warily suggested that it depicts "an uprooted black southerner living in the North . . . The opening section suggests the folk culture of the southerner, steeped in religion and expressed through the spiritual. The second section might have represented the southerner after relocation – now with a case of the blues."[6]

Alas, music is more ambiguous than language. It can express sadness, but not specify whether it stems from an ended love affair or a dry bank account. As with a Rorschach test, we are left with impressions that many different stories fit equally well. To stay on solid ground, an extramusical interpretation needs a clincher: a detailed, section-by-section correspondence to the music, or a quotation, or a recurring formal solution – or Duke's word, if any.

A piece that has long elicited sundry (and mutually incompatible) decipherments is *Black and Tan Fantasy* (1927). Mercer Ellington once asked his father about its origin, but got a typical Ducal answer, clouding rather than clarifying. Duke was nicknamed "the Artful Dodger" from his ability to find a way around direct questions on private matters.[7] According to Mercer – who was eight in 1927 – Duke said it commemorated the death of his affair with Fredi Washington, the main actress in Dudley Murphy's movie *Black and Tan*.[8] This makes no sense, as the movie was produced two years later. Other explanations have been attempted, but they only fit sections of the piece.[9] A new one is offered here.

Black and Tan Fantasy "was written in a taxi cab on the way to a recording session,"[10] and recorded three times in 1927. Comparison of versions shows that, in fact, it didn't require much paper. The piece is a blues with a verse, conflating two of Ellington's favorite forms: the verse-and-refrain song format, and the blues format with different reharmonizations for each section, following this structure: R-V-R-R-R-R-R. It begins with a plaintive melody in minor, based on Stephen Adams's sacred song "The Holy City," and ends with a final tutti quoting Chopin's "Marche funèbre."

What was really staged at the Kentucky and then at the larger Cotton Club is only vaguely known. Black was supposed to be synonymous with savage, and exotic foils abounded. Dancers, male and female – two or three per routine, given the narrow space – were often as scantily clad as decency would allow. Also, Harlem cabarets were not opera houses, where people get detailed program notes; plots had to be simple and easy to grasp.

Now, the reader is invited to think of a very famous story, set in a primitive location, and requiring little tailor work.

Please take your time to guess.

Yes, Genesis. Adam and Eve chased away from Eden. A story anybody recognizes, set in the primitive scenario par excellence. Compare point by point the music with the biblical verses.

1. *Adam and Eve are God-fearing and live in unity* (Gen. 2:24, "and they shall be one flesh"): Cornet and trombone, in parallel harmony, play a simple melody, lifted from the refrain (in major) of "The Holy City," where it says "Jerusalem! Jerusalem! Lift up your gates and sing: Hosanna in the highest! Hosanna to your King!"
2. *The serpent tempts Eve* (3:1): The mellifluous alto sax plays a winding, seductive six-bar melody. *Eve says no* (3:2–3): The band "waves its head" – a semitone motif going alternately in opposite directions. *The serpent tempts Eve again* (3:4–5): Same alto sax melody. *Eve agrees*: An assertive two-bar cadence.
3. *Eve bites the apple*: A long, sustained high B♭ (the crux of the piece, notated). *She is happy and invites Adam as well* (3:6): A talking (with plunger mute) cornet solo on the major blues, also featuring laughter (a descending scale played staccato) on bar nine.
4. *Adam and Eve suddenly acquire knowledge* (3:7: "And the eyes of them both were opened"): Piano solo on a new blues progression, now suddenly replete with sophisticated harmonic knowledge.
5. *God asks and curses* (3:8–15): Harsh trombone solo. Notice the "cursing" downward glissando on bar nine (found in all early versions).
6. *Adam and Eve beg for mercy*: Cornet plea. *But they are chased away*: Abrupt band chord (3:24, the "flaming sword." All this twice). *As a punishment, death enters humankind* (3:19, "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return"): "Marche funèbre."

Readers may want to estimate the odds that it is all coincidental.

If this is the plot, no wonder Duke shrouded it in silence. He must have felt embarrassed about using the Bible for a sexy floorshow, and his returning to the subject in his *Second Sacred Concert* takes on a flavor of atonement.

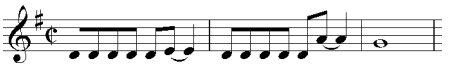
A different case is *Black Beauty* (1928), a piece meant not for an actual theatrical routine, but as a musical depiction thereof. It portrays the talented actress/singer/dancer Florence Mills (1896–1927). Its 1943 remake bore a subtitle, *Portrait of Florence Mills*, never attested before, and scholar Mark Tucker assumed the dedication had been invented *a posteriori*.[11] Analysis shows the opposite.

Soon after Florence's unexpected death, a few lugubrious records were hastily put together to thrive on the grief. Duke had a hand in a couple. But then he felt the need for a less passing homage. The painter in him conceived the idea of a "portrait" in sound. But how can such a thing be

done? Duke found here the solution he was to resort to in virtually every portrait – drawing from a melody associated with the portrayed person.

Florence was endowed with a petite, supple body, a shrill voice, and a natural talent for acting and dancing. She appeared in revues, often performing duo routines with a male partner (Ulysses S. Thompson, Johnny Nit). Her hit was "I'm a Little Blackbird Looking for a Bluebird," from *Dixie to Broadway* (1924), a song that can be interpreted as hinting at interracial love. She was largely identified with that tune, which quickly sank into oblivion after she passed away.

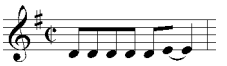
In order to suggest a blackbird, songwriters George Meyer and Arthur Johnston used a common bird-call motif: a repeated note followed by an upward jump. Its first two instances are found right at the beginning of the chorus:



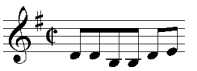
Such a pattern is not hard to notice on the original edition – it appears 15 times.

But which bird is this? No blackbird for sure.[12] Bird-call motifs in ancient music had to be very specific (in times when anybody could tell a nightingale from a sparrow, an art largely lost to us moderns) and at the same time adhere to a fixed musical pattern. For instance, a downward minor third meant "cuckoo," as in Bernardo Pasquini or Johann Kaspar Kerll. One can also find the nightingale (François Couperin), finch (Vivaldi's famous flute concerto), dove (François Dagincourt), and so on. Now the sad news is, the bird in this song is the *hen*. The clearest example is Jean-Philippe Rameau's *La poule* (1728); the oldest one, possibly Alessandro Poglietti's *Capriccio und Canzona über das Henner- und Hannergeschrey* (*c*.1680). Meyer and Johnston may have known the hen motif from Gottschalk's *La gallina* (1863) or perhaps, brutally but effectively, resorted to inverting a motif from "Listen to the Mocking Bird."

Oblivious of ornithology, Duke picked up this pattern as the song's trademark and changed *two* pitches,[13] from

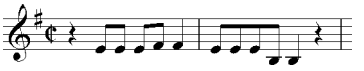


to



This appears in the first theme; the intro is made entirely from another variant of the same motif. Also, a rhythmic pattern is picked up from the verse. A new melody is born, in pure Ducal style, out of fragments of "I'm a Little Blackbird," prompting identification from period listeners. (The following generation needed the subtitle.)

Black Beauty has two themes, A (32 bars) and B (16), appearing in ABAA order. In the above-described A, the showgirl, with her seductive aura, shrill voice, and supple movements, is depicted not only by Ellington's melody but also by Arthur Whetsol's tone and phrasing. His muted trumpet *is* Florence. Then, both the bridge from A and the entire B apparently introduce a male character, played by Joe Nanton's trombone. On B, we hear the dancing of some chorus girls behind him, rendered by three high-pitched reeds performing close steps in staccato fashion, like the patting of heels and toes on the stage – actually an inversion of the "modified hen" motif:



In the second occurrence of A, a tap-dancing duo routine is depicted by a (largely notated) dialogue in the rhythm section. First, drummer Sonny Greer and Duke's right hand portray the light-footed Florence, then Wellman Braud's slapped bass impersonates her more muscular partner – then her again, then him, and so forth. Finally, in the third occurence of A, Florence's theme reappears, played by Barney Bigard on the clarinet – she wouldn't sing soon after dancing, as she would be out of breath. She (that is, Whetsol's muted trumpet) only returns for the final eight bars, ending up with a little *rallentando* bow. We have been exposed to a three-minute sketch of Florence Mills's stage art.[14]

Mimicry to dictionary

Over the years, Duke's experimenting with the descriptive resources of his band formed a rich tool kit. Being as fertile and as pressured by deadlines as the old opera masters, he reused and refashioned old solutions, while also trying new ones and exchanging them with Billy Strayhorn. Tried-and-true tricks piled up in what we might call *Duke's Daunting Database of Depictions*. A few tentative entries are offered below.[15]

America

A trumpet fanfare that seems to stand for either the nation or the continent in at least two compositions. In the *Liberian Suite* (1947), it bursts

at the end of "Dance No. 2," apparently disjointed from the rest of the movement (a miniature concerto for clarinet, vibraharp, and band). As I have suggested elsewhere,[16] the piece depicts the Middle Passage on a slave ship, and the fanfare means "destination reached." (The following "Dance No. 3" reveals that the ship landed in Cuba.) In *Harlem* (1951), a similar fanfare rounds up the entire tone poem. After depicting various corners of Harlem in an imaginary promenade, it proudly reaffirms that such a human microcosm entirely belongs in the American mold. This was a significant statement by which Ellington distanced himself from the Marxist left à la Paul Robeson, from separatists, and from Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement.

Ascension to Heaven

Climbing up to the *altissimo* register. In the "Dance No. 3," Ray Nance's violin impersonates an African who comes out of the ship barely alive, feebly sings a sad song, and dies. Death is depicted by the solo violin cadenza, which ends up on a barely audible high pitch: the poor prisoner's soul flies to Heaven. Similarly, when Ellington wrote *In the Beginning God* (1965), he gave his trumpet marvel, Cat Anderson, a cadenza at the end of the third section. In the live recording made at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York, soon after Anderson squeezes his most piercing screech out of his trumpet, Duke says: "That's the highest we got!"

Birds

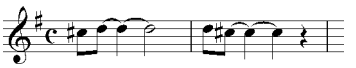
Motifs resembling bird calls, played by a reed instrument. None have been found in Duke's early years, when his descriptions were mostly confined to Harlem and to people. Only later, as he began traveling extensively, were his painter's eye and composer's ear drawn to new visual and sound landscapes; then bird calls appeared. Known examples are "Sunset and the Mocking Bird," from *The Queen's Suite* (1959), and a Strayhorn contribution, "Bluebird of Delhi," from *The Far East Suite* (1964). In a symphony orchestra, such calls are typically scored for flute or oboe. Having neither instrument, Duke and Strayhorn systematically resorted to Jimmy Hamilton's immaculate clarinet. It is therefore reasonable to suspect that some contrapuntally independent clarinet parts in other pieces hide hitherto unidentified birds – the final bar of "I Like the Sunrise," for instance.

Dancers

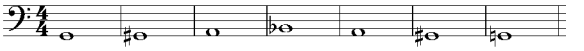
A duo/trio section with piano exchanging rhythmic patterns with bass, drums, or both, suggesting foot-tapping. The *Black Beauty* routine is the

prototype. The same idea opens and closes *Bojangles* (1940), a portrait of the great dancer Bill Robinson, and is then expanded into a formidable cutting contest in *Pitter Panther Patter* (1940), a tour de force duo with Duke, the older dancer, challenging young bassist Jimmie Blanton to perform several steps, some already out of fashion (James P. Johnson's *Charleston* is quoted). In the *Perfume Suite* (1944), the third movement, "Dancers in Love" ("Stomp for Beginners"), depicts naïveté; its sparse texture and small melodic intervals sketch the hesitating steps of a young couple. The foot-tapping was originally introduced by the plucked bass, then – in later versions – by finger-snapping. That emphatically wrong F♯ (in F major) on the V-Disc version may symbolize a wrong step. A still later example is *Tap Dancer's Blues* (1966).

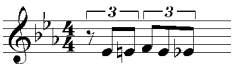
Ellington himself acknowledged that Will Marion Cook taught him such common compositional techniques as retrograding (right to left) and inverting (up to down) motifs.[17] Whenever such motifs were finalized to depict, suggest, or accompany dance movements, Duke had a chance to display his obsession for symmetry. In fact, his penchant for palindromes – symmetric motifs that are identical played backwards – peeps out everywhere. Examples include the opening cell from *Azure* (1937):



a variant of which occurs in "Autumnal Suite" from *Paris Blues* (1961); Duke's left-hand line from *Fragmented Suite for Piano and Bass* (1972), third movement;[18]

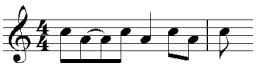


or the opening five tones

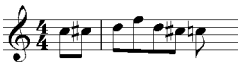


from *Blue Feeling* (1934), by the way a piece entirely symmetrical in form.

Obviously, palindromes, as motifs pointing to gestures, are useful in dance numbers, for whatever you do on stage, sooner or later you must either do the opposite or walk out. Palindromes also effectively underline circular movements of limbs or torso. An early case seems to be *Hop Head* (1927), a Charleston clearly intended not for flappers but for professional dancers, who apparently got specific clues to body movements from the music (or vice versa). Here, as elsewhere, Duke suggests footwork by repeating a close interval:

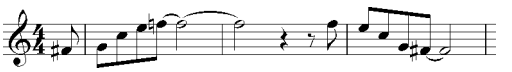


Also, the title is period jargon for "opium taker." Those who consume opium will probably feel their heads spinning; hence the "revolving" opening pattern



likely suggested circular head movements. Both motifs are palindromic. The latter comes from a Cook song, "Bon Bon Buddy." Ellington knew the song well – he had quoted another motif from it in *Li'l Farina* (1925).[19]

Finally, the association of palindrome and dance gesture shows up in a ballet, *Night Creature* (1955). Its opening motif has five notes followed by their retrograde:



Diversity

Abruptly juxtaposed or superimposed snapshots of music depicting a heterogeneous humankind. The intro from *Harlem Air Shaft* (1940) is a case in point – a jigsaw puzzle of sharply contrasting musical blocks with distinct identities, tone colors, and keys: a trumpet motif redolent of a field holler (in A-flat), a sax motif perhaps evoking a church organ (in C), and a trombone motif suggesting a gramophone playing a Count Basie record, *Swingin' the Blues* (in E).

Diversity boasts a respectable ancestry in American music. Way before "melting pot" and "multi-kulti" were coined, New World composers strove to convey an image of their nation hosting different cultures – think of Gershwin's *"I Got Rhythm" Variations*, Gottschalk's symphony *La Nuit des Tropiques*, and most of Ives's output. Their forefather was Mexican chapel-master Gaspar Fernandes (1566–1629), with his kaleidoscopic *Cancionero de Oaxaca*. However, those composers focused on ethnic diversity; Ellington's air-shaft diversity is rather about individuals – people walking, dressing, cooking, dancing, singing, and praying in various ways. It is found from the extended opening of *Merry-Go-Round* (1933) all the way down to the convulsive *Traffic Jam* (1967). At first, it was an image of Harlem. Then, as Ellington acquired a taste for globe-trotting, he broadened his views, only to discover that the Earth is nothing but a larger Harlem, which he looked at from above, as it were, taking

colorful, bizarre, moving, witty musical snapshots he then combined in geographic suites, such as *The Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* (1971).

Faith

A Negro spiritual paraphrased or emulated to mean "God," "church," or "prayer." On occasion the original is recognizable: the first theme of "Dance No. 1" from the *Liberian Suite* (1947) is redolent of "Wade in the Water," and the opening theme from *Echoes of the Jungle* evokes "Go Down, Moses" but comes from the first movement of Dvořák's "New World" symphony, bars 148–151. Other themes sound original. "Come Sunday" (1943), in particular, might be called "Duke's plainchant" as he used it from *Black, Brown and Beige* (1943) to *David Danced Before the Lord* (1963). But "Come Sunday" is untypical. Most of Duke's religious themes are opened by the major triad arpeggio, as in *Echoes of the Jungle* or the church theme in *Harlem*.

One of the Artful Dodger's best kept secrets was his being a Freemason. He had attended Masonic venues since 1919,[20] and in 1932 was affiliated with Washington's Social Lodge No. 1 of the Prince Hall (black) Freemasonry. His major, or only, Masonic work is the *Liberian Suite*, commissioned for Liberia's centennial. President William V. S. Tubman was also a Mason, and Masons had a major role in Liberia's history. When Duke had his suites premiered at Carnegie Hall he loved to explain their underlying stories. On the *Liberian Suite* he only spent few, and actually misleading, words. The Masonic double entendre peeps out in the opening "I Like the Sunrise," where an African (singer Al Hibbler) delivers a hymn to the Sun. As a Christian, Ellington does not portray his African ancestor as a pagan or polytheist, but as a forerunner of monotheism. Actually monotheism was invented in Africa by the pharaoh Akhenaton, who, in his ill-fated revolution, forced the replacement of the old pantheon with the Sun. Of course, identifying the Christian God with an Egyptian one is very Masonic. Again, the opening theme is built on the major triad, C–E–G.

This writer's interpretation of the piece had stopped here for years, until an incredible confirmation dawned on him. In both the studio and live recordings, Hibbler sings the words "I like the sunrise" seven times.[21] The word "sunrise" is increasingly smoothed out. He gradually obliterates "–se" and pronounces "sun ray," then obliterates "–y" and says "I like the Sun Ra." The real meaning of the piece is thus exposed to the initiated and veiled to laypeople.

Fear

An emotion rare in Duke, but usually related to the whole-tone scale. In Ellington and Strayhorn's *Perfume Suite* (1944), the second movement, "Strange Feeling" (that is, violence) has a theme by Strayhorn, who also

orchestrated the sung part. The instrumental first half, scored by Ellington, has a recurring whole-tone scale at the end of each A section.[22] In "Dance No. 2" from the *Liberian Suite*, the solo clarinet, playing an African in chains on the slave ship, expresses his terror in up-and-down whole-tone scales. The prototype is perhaps the ghostly clarinet–banjo duet in *Echoes of the Jungle* (1931), where the clarinet has a repeated up-and-down pattern, which, albeit blurred in a quasi-glissando, is whole-tone upward (not downward). Shivers of fear are in tenor banjo tremolo-glissando effects.

Man/Woman

Two contrasting musical ideas depicting the conflict/attraction of sexes. In Cotton Club floorshows, concise stories of seduction, courtship, attraction/refusal, and runaway/pursuit, performed by a male and a female dancer, were simple and universal enough to be grasped without words. Duke translated such dualities into music by assigning each character one theme. Cook probably taught him the common bithematic forms in classical music. Some, such as the ABA *Lied* form, would soon come in handy for three-minute records (*Awful Sad*, *The Mooche*). Others, such as sonata form, were less suitable. Ellington also used folk-like alternating bithematic forms, as in ABABAB (*East St. Louis Toodle-O*), or could raise the verse of a song to the dignity of a second theme, as in ABAAAA (*Black and Tan Fantasy*, *Old Man Blues*, *Mood Indigo*, and more, up to *Suite Thursday*). Pieces from any category may display a male/female polarity. This is subtler than just scoring for high and low registers; rather, it often seems to express a basic idea Ellington associated with women – attractiveness. Apparently he was fascinated not only by actual women, but also by women as a source of an invisible essence, drawing men like the smell of a rose draws a bee. It is this essence that he repeatedly tried to express in sound. In fact, most of his female themes are associated with a *call*, and not only in bithematic pieces. The earliest case is *Creole Love Call* (1927), with its elementary two-note motif (picked up from King Oliver, but first of a series of similar motifs in Duke) and Adelaide Hall improvising over it.

A masterpiece in the genre is *The Mystery Song*. Again, the title alludes to a call, again stemming out of a two-note motif, this time apparently coming from a remote horizon. Gunther Schuller stressed the "distant, muted tone color" of that A strain for the brass choir (although he dismissed the rest of the piece).[23] To get this effect, Ellington chose the D major key, rare in jazz and unlikely for brass, followed by a male B strain (in C major) – one of those warm, seductive reed obbligatos Ellington was capable of. The man is soft-spoken but articulate – all sorts of intervals are found in the melody. The two get closer in the following A section, an

intimate, nocturnal, whispered dialogue. Here Ellington picks up the high clarinet and the low baritone sax, but gives the low instrument the high register and vice versa, so that they come closer – the sweet baritone plays the woman's role and theme; it even laughs on bar 29. The deep clarinet improvises the man's answers. And then comes the finale, where the two themes embrace and reach fusion: melodic cells from B are placed over the chord structure of A. A four-bar tag-ending quickly switches the lights off.

Yet the apex of Ellington's work in the genre is probably *On a Turquoise Cloud* (1947), starring classical soprano Kay Davis for the mysterious female call, and Lawrence Brown's trombone in a masterful rendering of an elegant, handsome seducer. Duke no longer worked at the Cotton Club, yet he still saw a stage in his mind. His piano intro is a curtain raiser. In A, Kay Davis sings her call; B follows, played by Brown (who actually composed this melody). Then A and B merge, like in *The Mystery Song*, but in reverse pattern: A motifs (voice and clarinets) on B chords. Finally – and symmetrically – she sings A again, with the trombone discreetly in the background. Now the two elements fuse: we can almost *see* the final embrace, in the exceedingly long fermata with its astonishing blend of tone colors. This languid finale is like a long, never-ending kiss. And simultaneously (not afterwards!) we hear Ellington's piano intro, which had raised the curtain and now lowers it, wisely veiling the two lovers' privacy. As if Duke would no longer describe, but rather wink: "You can imagine the rest."

Message

A musical episode focused on percussion and/or hosting a drum solo, associated with the traditional image of talking "jungle drums" (which ought to be properly called "savannah idiophones"). One example is the opening from *Black, Brown and Beige* (1943). Ellington's own typescript plot of *Boola*, the unfinished opera this suite was extracted from, begins:

> A message is shot through the jungle by drums
> Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!
> Like a tom-tom in steady precision . . .[24]

which fits the opening bars. The idea of message is again conveyed by tympani in "Dance No. 4" from the *Liberian Suite*, where the message is one of liberation – ships will carry freed blacks back to Liberia.

Portrait

A piece depicting somebody by means of a motif that listeners associate with that person. The earliest example is the cited *Black Beauty*. Another is

Portrait of the Lion (1939), based on the B theme from Willie "The Lion" Smith's composition *Passionette*.

River

Decades after *Swampy River*, this idea resurfaced as a ballet, *The River* (1970). For this piece, as choreographer Alvin Ailey discovered, Duke did "meticulous research on water music from various musical periods, including Handel's *Water Music*, Debussy's *La mer*, Britten's *Peter Grimes*, and Smetana's *Moldau*."[25] Most of the episodes illustrating parts of the river ("Spring," "Vortex," etc.) expand those already detectable, in embryonic form, in the 1928 piano solo.

Speech

A soloist emulating the human voice. Famous examples are the two-note opening motif from *Harlem*, with the muted trumpet pronouncing the word "Har-lem," and several occurrences in *Such Sweet Thunder*, co-composed with Strayhorn: the four "sonnets," with a soloist delivering a melody cast in sonnet format – 14 phrases of (more or less) 11 pitches – or musical sentences that fit an actual line from Shakespeare, as with Puck (trumpeter Clark Terry) delivering "Lord, what fools these mortals be" in "Up and Down, Up and Down."[26]

Train

Onomatopoeia of train noise. This runs the gamut from the whistle interpolation in *Choo Choo* (1924), to the happily running locomotive in *Lightnin'* (1932), to the astonishingly detailed and virtuosic *Daybreak Express* (1933), to a further transformation into a social-political symbol in *Happy Go Lucky Local*, the popular finale to the *Deep South Suite* (1946), to the abstract *Track 360* (1958).

Matter to spirit

Duke aimed higher as he grew older. In later years his writing, like in Beethoven's third style, took on a somewhat disembodied quality. Accordingly, his imagery delved more directly into abstract matters, giving old images a spiritual meaning.

In his three *Sacred Concerts* Duke gathered most entries of his descriptive dictionary, pushed to maximum intensity and turned into powerful metaphors. His musical descriptions rise from outer nature to inner nature, as Arnold Schoenberg would put it, in a sort of *Summa Theologica* of his art for faith's sake.

In the final section from *In the Beginning God*, Jesus' salvation message starts its run through the world. The chosen metaphor is of course the train. We hear a speaking chorus starting slowly and speeding up while calling the four Evangelists, then *Acts*, then the epistles of St. Paul, faster and faster, until the piece explodes in an infectious drum solo – in Duke's code, the greatest message a drum could ever spread – finally pointing to Heaven with Cat Anderson's trumpet. The imagery of diversity reappears in the *Second Sacred Concert*, as the final gathering of all humankind, "the place where all ends end," the Judgement Day, here called "The Biggest and Busiest Intersection." And, in a more contemplative form, in a collection of musical prayers in contrasting styles – "Every Man Prays in His Own Language" (*Third Sacred Concert*).

In Ellington's last creations, the trip from worldly imagery to supernatural imagery is completed. Now, the trip into the meanings of his oeuvre is up to us.

Notes

1 A. H. Lawrence, *Duke Ellington and His World: A Biography* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 45.
2 Marcello Piras, "Works" section of "Duke Ellington" entry in *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
3 Ruggero Orlando, interview with Ellington in *Duke Ellington: Jazz e simpatia*, RAI documentary, 1966. Ellington was composing *The Golden Broom and the Green Apple*. RAI is Italy's public radio and television company.
4 Duke Ellington, *Music Is My Mistress* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), 47.
5 Duke Ellington, "My Hunt for Song Titles," *Rhythm*, August 1933, 22–23. Reprinted in *The Duke Ellington Reader*, ed. Mark Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 88.
6 Mark Tucker, *Ellington: The Early Years* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 233.
7 Derek Jewell, *Duke: A Portrait of Duke Ellington* (London: Elm Tree Books, 1977), *passim*.
8 Mercer Ellington with Stanley Dance, *Duke Ellington in Person: An Intimate Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978; reprint, New York: Da Capo, 1979), 48.
9 Mark Buselli, in "Duke's Use of Visual Imagery" (formerly published on the Internet, but no longer online) correctly focuses on the Man/Woman duality but places it in the wrong piece (as this writer, too, has done for years). David Metzer's article "Shadow Play: The Spiritual in Duke Ellington's 'Black and Tan Fantasy'," *Black Music Research Journal* 17/2 (1997): 137–58, has pure speculation.
10 Stanley Dance, *The World of Duke Ellington* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970; reprint, New York: Da Capo, 1981), 271.
11 Mark Tucker, private letter to Bill Egan, author of *Florence Mills: Harlem Jazz Queen* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2004), *c.* 1999.
12 As can be verified at www.garden-birds.co.uk/birds/blackbird.htm#Voice.
13 Here transposed in G to facilitate comparison.
14 Reference to an earlier stage of this analysis is in Egan, *Florence Mills*, 285.
15 Descriptive devices found only once in Ellington's oeuvre are not included.
16 For a detailed deciphering of this major work, see Marcello Piras, "Ellington narratore di storie: la *Liberian Suite*," *I Quaderni – Trimestrale dell'Istituto Gramsci Marche* 32 (1999): 41–67.
17 He said that Cook "would give me lectures in music. I'd sing a melody in its simplest form and he'd stop me and say, 'Reverse your figures'." *Ellington Reader*, ed. Tucker, 241.
18 Syncopated variants not notated.
19 This quotation was first noticed by Randy Sandke, to whom I am indebted. I subsequently discovered that Cook's motif, too, is a manipulated quotation from Franz Lehár's "Vilja's Lied." The teacher had passed on to his pupil not only the specific melody, but also the general trick.

20 See ad reproduced in Tucker, *Early Years*, 60.
21 Some (inconclusive) evidence suggests that Hibbler himself might have been a Freemason.
22 Walter van de Leur, *Something to Live For: The Music of Billy Strayhorn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 94.
23 Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 356.
24 Quoted in Maurice Peress, *Dvořák to Duke Ellington* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 181. From the original typescript housed at the Smithsonian Institution.
25 John Franceschina, *Duke Ellington's Music for the Theatre* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), 161.
26 Only in one of the two known takes.