9 Jazz among the classics, and the case of Duke Ellington

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> There is [in 1957] an increasing interrelationship between the adherents to art forms in various fields. Contemporary jazz, for instance, has many enthusiastic listeners in its audience who are classical musicians of heroic stature. Indeed, some classical musicians in recent years have involved themselves with jazz as composers, soloists, or both. I am not pointing this out in any attempt to plead for tolerance, for jazz is not in need of tolerance, but of understanding and intelligent appreciation. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly difficult to decide where jazz starts or where it stops, where Tin Pan Alley begins and jazz ends, or even where the borderline lies between classical music and jazz. I feel there is no boundary line, and I see no place for one if my own feelings tell me a performance is good. [ELLINGTON 1973, 193]

Currently one of the least fashionable ways of looking at jazz is from the perspective of 'classical' music – a label still used in record shops, and still understood instinctively by almost everybody, in spite of its avoidance by commentators who have yet to find an acceptable substitute. (Of the alternative terms, 'art music' is just as politically incorrect as 'classical', while 'concert music' can be applied to almost everything; in America, classical music is deemed to be 'European' in a simplistic antithesis to African-American traditions.) The once common notion that jazz might be thought of as 'America's classical music' has long been discredited. Yet no amount of quibbling about labels will make the parallels between the classical and jazz worlds go away; and those who insist on the uniqueness of jazz and its incompatability with essential characteristics of classical music cut themselves off from the richness of allusion and crossover at the heart of all the best western music of the twentieth century. It was perhaps because of this limited outlook that Duke Ellington, on his own admission, stopped using the word 'jazz' in 1943 (*ibid.*, 452). In imposing on jazz musicians the necessity for artistic independence from allegedly inappropriate aesthetic and technical considerations, commentators often neglect to take the musicians' own views into account: for some jazz performers and composers, certain tenets of the classical world have been (however uncomfortably to modern sensibilities) something to aspire to rather than shun. As long as jazz is deemed to possess intellectual and emotional content worthy of respect and serious study, and as long as it is performed in public and recorded for posterity, the parallels with classical music – and the artistic tensions inherent in them – demand exploration.

A clear-cut distinction between jazz as improvised music and classical as pre-composed has been invalid since the very beginnings of jazz. In an attempt to soften the distinction, pianist Bill Evans coined the terms 'contemplative' (predominantly pre-composed) and 'spontaneous' (predominantly improvised) and stressed their common ground:

> you can't find in jazz the perfection of craft that is possible in contemplative music. Yet, oddly enough, this very lack of perfection can result in good jazz. For example, in classical music, a mistake is a mistake. But in jazz, a mistake can be – in fact, must be – justified by what follows it. If you were improvising a speech and started a sentence in a way you hadn't intended, you would have to carry it out so that it would make sense. It is the same in spontaneous music.
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> In good contemplative composition, the creator tries to *recapture* those qualities – the trouble is that there are a lot of so-called composers who compose primarily by putting together tones in a logical structure they have set up. But spontaneous material can be worked over and developed, according to the limits of the person's craft. And the result will in some way be in touch with the universal language of understanding in music.
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> [R. Gottlieb 1996, 426]

When jazz is pre-composed the results need not sound unspontaneous: the big bands of the swing era and since have been characterised by complex textures designed to sound like massed improvisations, with head arrangements often transmitted and refined by experimentation and oral communication rather than by written charts. A big-band number sounds spontaneous just as a late romantic symphony (which may have taken years to compose) should come across as a spontaneous outpouring of feeling in any good performance. In either case, whether the music was pre-planned or spur-of-the-moment becomes an irrelevance. This paradox is especially encountered in contemporary classical music, where detailed predetermination and aleatoric techniques can sometimes produce surprisingly similar results. Indeed, classical music since the 1950s has aspired to the condition of (sometimes random) spontaneity, an aspiration that clearly parallels the work of certain free-jazz artists of the 1960s. In some free jazz, only the presence of bass and drums lends a 'jazz' feel to the music, the 'gravitational pull' of such a rhythm section suggesting that recognition of characteristic sonorities and textures is a vital part of the jazz experience (see Schuller 1996, 72).

Ellington's scepticism on the validity of improvisation is well known, though he criticised the label more than the concept. When asked 'How important is improvisation in jazz?', he replied:

> The word 'improvisation' has great limitations, because when musicians are given solo responsibility they already have a suggestion of a melody

> written for them, and before they begin they already know more or less what they are going to play. Anyone who plays anything worth hearing knows what he's going to play, no matter whether he prepares a day ahead or a beat ahead. It has to be with intent. [Ellington 1973, 465]

He offered more along the same lines in a programme note written for his tour of the UK in 1958: 'Improvisation really consists of picking out a device here, and connecting it with a device there; changing the rhythm here, and pausing there; there has to be some thought preceding each phrase, otherwise it is meaningless' (quoted in Rattenbury 1990, 14). That this view appears to subscribe to the classical composer's traditional desire for rational 'control' of material is symptomatic of Ellington's attitude to the art in general.

It is easy to forget that classical music has enjoyed its own substantial doses of spontaneity and widespread popular appeal over the centuries, and it was largely the rise of modernism in the twentieth century that diverted attention towards more esoteric considerations. Historical awareness of musical trends before the late nineteenth century is a useful factor in reassessing attempts to segregate jazz and the classics on aesthetic grounds. Baroque music, even in church, was heavily indebted to catchy dance rhythms, and as a result undoubtedly sounded far more accessible to contemporaneous audiences than to the historically remote audience of today (though the authentic-performance movement in the 1970s did much to restore a buoyancy in Baroque performance lacking in the romantic approach of the previous generation). Roger Pryor Dodge pointed out as early as 1934 that reportage concerning spontaneous music-making in Rome in 1639 holds as true for jazz as for early Baroque music, and went on to cite classical parallels in an analysis of Ellington's *Black and Tan Fantasy* (see R. Gottlieb 1996, 748). Performers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries improvised elaborate melodic decorations and occasionally entire movements from scratch (e.g., the slow movement of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 3, which survives only as a harmonic skeleton of two chords), even including complex fugal counterpoint, while the basso continuo was in effect a prototypical rhythm section. The techniques of keyboard improvisation have remained a vital component of the church organist's art to the present day, and for those classical musicians who have not trained themselves in this practice (which was much more widespread when Dodge made his remarks on Baroque music in the 1930s, and is now a rapidly dying art), the skills can seem just as remote and mysterious as jazz improvisation (see Chapter 8).

Classical performers no longer improvise cadenzas when playing concertos from the eighteenth century, although they were expected to do so up

to at least the time of Beethoven. For those of today's jazz musicians trained in both classical and jazz styles, however, the situation is different. One rare modern exponent of the improvised cadenza is Chick Corea, whose jazz-inflected cadenzas for Mozart's piano concertos have shown him to be very much aware of this vital historical link between jazz and the classics. Corea's Mozart enterprise was turned to commercial advantage by Sony in the medium of televised concert in the 1990s: the broadcast depended for its success on the assumption that it would appeal simultaneously to two still reasonably distinct types of audience (to three, in fact, since the participants included bluegrass/new acoustic violinist Mark O'Connor). Wynton Marsalis's jazz ballets are now marketed on the Sony Classical label, while Django Bates's orchestral jazz is listed under the heading 'jazz/contemporary classical' by Decca.[1] This trend reinforces the comment made by George Avakian that the third stream – originally a provocative blend of jazz and classical techniques promoted in the late 1950s – has now simply become mainstream.[2]

Some jazz musicians, including Bates, nevertheless remain distinctly self-conscious in the classical arena. Skilled in both composition and improvisation, Bates remarked of his orchestral work, *Tentle Morments* (1989), that it had been conceived

> with the misguided intention of proving to the classical music world that I could write in various classical styles and must therefore be acceptable. I managed to rescue myself five-eighths into the piece, shaking some sense into me through the use of several badly executed Mozart trills which by their very ridiculousness reminded me how ridiculous I was being.[3]

Bates's disingenuous commentary on this witty and accomplished work misses a vital irony: the sudden intrusion of the Mozart keyboard cliché, far from saying 'look at me trying to be classical', reinforces the parallels between jazz and the classics because the formulaic trills are precisely those that invariably brought *improvised* cadenzas to an end in the eighteenth century. As a result, the Mozartean allusions can to some ears sound more spontaneous than the (pre-composed) jazzier sections surrounding them. The age-old tension between the 'clever' and the 'instinctive' refuses to go away.

Not all early jazz critics shared Dodge's wholesome attitude towards the problem in the 1930s. Winthrop Sargeant, versed in both classical and jazz styles, wrote scathingly in 1946 on both the then growing notion that jazz might be acceptable in the concert hall, and the attempts of various composers to bridge the stylistic gap between the two allegedly incompatible worlds:

> Jazz concerts in Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan Opera House have been hailed as cultural milestones when, in fact, they only proved that jazz can be played in uncongenial surroundings . . . Ever since the pundit Hugues Panassié discovered *le jazz hot* in a French chateau full of phonograph records, the world of intellectual jazz addicts has been calling a spade a *cuiller à caviar*. The ebullient, hit-and-miss ensemble of a New Orleans stomp is reverently described as 'counterpoint'; the jazz trumpeter's exuberant and raucous lapses from true pitch are mysteriously referred to as 'quarter tones' or 'atonality'. Jazz, as an art with a capital A, has become something to be listened to with a rapt air that would shame the audiences of the Budapest Quartet. To dance to it (which is just what its primitive Negro originators would do) becomes a profanation.
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> [R. Gottlieb 1996, 766]

Jazz, according to Sargeant, can only be described in enthusiastically emotive terms ('ebullient', 'exuberant', 'raucous') and not subjected to technical analysis. His conviction that jazz is a folk music, and that 'the distinction between folk music and art music is profound and nearly absolute', leads him inevitably to the conclusion that it 'has not proved itself an art of sufficient poetic or intellectual scope to take the place in civilized society occupied by the great art of concert and operatic music' (*ibid.*, 772). Even its emotional impact, he implies, has been enhanced more by comparison with the aridity of modern classical composers than by any inherent artistic merit, and it will appeal more strongly to a popular rather than highbrow audience. This view is, of course, severely dated, and entirely ignores the fact that arid technical analysis is equally capable of trivialising the emotional strengths of classical music. Why not describe the finale of Mozart's G major String Quartet (K387), for example, as 'ebullient' and 'exuberant' and forget about all the self-conscious – and undoubtedly tongue-in-cheek – counterpoint it contains? Mozart wrote plenty of entertainment music for social functions, too, though those who place him squarely in the pantheon of great composers may find this fact uncomfortable, as is the realisation that not all of his music can claim to be profound.

Attempts to reserve technical competence and intellectual complexity as the exclusive province of classical music became steadily less prominent in the 1950s, though not all commentators avoided confusion and inconsistency in their fluctuating attitudes. A good example is the case of bop, once lauded as the ultimate in spontaneity and then taken to task for its 'fetishizing technique' and the fact that it was 'too mesmerized by the devices and concepts of European music' (Gendron 1995, 49). By the 1960s, some jazz had grown so esoteric and complex in its technical procedures that it had become just as elitist as the classics; and the reaction against the commercial motivation behind jazz-rock fusion in the 1970s was, as Gary

Tomlinson has put it, 'a snobbish distortion of history by jazz purists attempting to insulate their cherished classics from the messy marketplace in which culture has always been negotiated' (in Bergeron and Bohlman 1992 82). Tomlinson's identification of 'the coercive power of the institutionalized jazz canon' suggests that some jazz has indeed attained the elitist status formerly the exclusive property of the classics. The nature of jazz's canonisation has been investigated by Krin Gabbard, who agrees with Scott DeVeaux that the concept of a jazz canon is as paradoxical as the jazz concert, and has drawn attention to those critics who – in his opinion – aim to 'theorize themselves and the music into positions of importance' and 'fetishize' the work of certain prominent musicians (Gabbard 1995b, 7).

Form and forming

Much analysis of jazz has taken as its starting point the old-fashioned classical notion that, in order for a work to be successful, it must display some kind of organic coherence – preferably goal-directed and founded on clear thematic developments. As Gabbard and others have pointed out, this approach can be inappropriate; Gabbard cites in particular the playing of Charlie Parker (often singled out as an exponent of so-called 'formulaic improvisation': see p. 148) and comments that 'Parker's work might just as easily be discussed in terms of how he *destroys* the illusion of organic unity in his solos by inserting easily recognizable fragments from other musical traditions' (Gabbard 1995b, 13). Gunther Schuller was in the 1950s one of the first commentators to realise that a basic misconception had blighted analysis of jazz:

> It has become increasingly clear [in 1956] that 'form' need not be a confining mold into which the tonal materials are poured, but rather that the forming process can be *directly* related to the musical material employed in a specific instance. In other words, *form* evolves out of the material itself and is not imposed upon it. We must learn to think of form as a verb rather than a noun. [1996, 19]

In Schuller's view, the greatest exponents of this process of forming in jazz were Ellington and Charles Mingus. If the drawbacks of narrow-sighted analysis of classical music (chiefly when dealing with historically revered tonal structures) have to some extent been carried over directly into the analysis of jazz, it is important to note that certain classical theorists have lamented this trend even in their own field.

Charles Rosen remarks of the classical style that the 'relation of the individual detail to the large form even in apparently improvisational works,

and the way the form is shaped freely in response to the smallest parts, give us the first style in music history where the organization is completely audible and where the form is never externally imposed' (Rosen 1976, 93). More provocatively, Rosen continues: 'The structure of a classical composition is related to the way its themes *sound*, not to what might be done with them' (*ibid.*, 94).[4] Both comments may be applied to the work of Ellington with singular appropriateness. Rosen's and Schuller's view that musical structures ideally evolve from the specific musical raw materials of a piece, and that form is not something to be imposed from without, compares directly with Bill Evans's criticism of 'a lot of so-called composers who compose primarily by putting together tones in a logical structure they have set up'. The more satisfying alternative is summarised in Rosen's memorable image of a piece taking shape as if 'literally impelled from within', which Joseph Kerman categorised as entelechy (Rosen 1976, 120, quoted in Kerman 1985, 151–2). In jazz, where sonority is paramount, such entelechy is even further removed from traditional classical notions of thematic development.

Sonority as structure

The concept of sonority as structure has become an increasingly valid way of approaching jazz, whether investigating the largely predetermined balancing of tonal contrasts in Jelly Roll Morton's music of the 1920s or comparable achievements by Ellington, swing bands, Claude Thornhill, Gil Evans or the Miles Davis nonet. The adaptation of idiosyncratic instrumental timbres to expressive ends has always been a characterising feature of the finest jazz improvisations, and a defining characteristic of Ellington's soloists from the late 1920s onwards. Schuller argues that the 'individual *personal* sonoric conception' of players and the music's 'timbral articulations' remain the true identifying features of jazz (1996, 29). This attitude allows him to assert, controversially but refreshingly, that the sound of Paul Whiteman's dance band is 'as original and as beautiful' as Ellington's – a comparison of which Ellington might well have approved, since he himself described the much-maligned bandleader in glowing terms, and wrote a piece specially for Whiteman's 1938 'Experiment in Modern Music' concert (*ibid.*, 45).[5] Ellington stated: 'To me, a musical instrument is in a sense a color instrument, and orchestral music should be scored to give full value to every possible shading and blending' (Tucker 1993, 247). Other writers, such as Sidney Finkelstein and Dan Morgenstern, have perceptively pointed out that Ellington's harmonies are inextricably linked with his timbres (*ibid.*, 353). Which listener, for example, can disassociate the evocative chords at the start of Ellington's famous 1930 recording of *Mood Indigo* from their

extraordinary instrumental timbres? In Ellington's work, structure is thus articulated as much by what Schuller terms 'timbral articulations' (in other words, Rosen's 'the way themes sound') as by reliance on pre-existing formal frameworks or conventional techniques of development. The vividness of Ellington's orchestral palette and its indissoluble links with his equally distinctive harmonic language combine to make his style instantly recognisable, allowing for successive moments in a piece to be savoured as spontaneous and characteristic sonorous gestures; at the same time, these gestures are organised into highly sophisticated and often unpredictable patterns that repay detailed analysis.

Part of the inappropriateness of applying a classical analytical approach to jazz arises from the fact that romanticised notions of musical structure are unhelpful when considering much twentieth-century music (in any idiom). There is no point in relating Ellington's work to nineteenth-century ideas of thematic unity, when he owed a much more significant debt to twentieth-century composers whose work was mostly rooted in entirely different organisational principles: one example is Delius, whose music Ellington studied intensely in 1933 with the help of 'a whole bundle of scores', an influence noted by Ellington's son, Mercer (Nicholson 1999, 148). Jazz musicians have been quick to admit to such modern influences: Parker was outspoken about his admiration for Hindemith, Bartók and Stravinsky ('I dig all the moderns', he told *Down Beat* on 28 January 1953); Miles Davis commented that his modal techniques were inspired by listening to Ravel and Khatchaturian (Davis and Troupe 1989, 220); and the debt shown by Cecil Taylor to Webern and late Stravinsky is self-evident.

Stravinsky's compositional techniques highlight some revealing common ground between jazz and modern classical music. Not surprisingly, his penchant for metrical displacements, relentless ostinato patterns and added-note harmony drew him towards jazz, from which he liberally borrowed ideas both in the ragtime and swing eras; he was no stranger to the music of Ellington, and occasionally attended the band's later Cotton Club performances (Nicholson 1999, 124). In his *Ragtime for Eleven Instruments* and *Piano-Rag-Music* (both composed in 1918), and much later *Ebony Concerto* (written for Woody Herman in 1945), the parallels between jazz elements and rhythmical and textural devices already inherent in Stravinsky's music are strong, and these exerted considerable influence on younger musicians of both classical and jazz persuasions – and on 'in-between' exponents of the third stream such as Leonard Bernstein. The influence persisted into the fusion boom of the early 1970s: the electric-bass ostinati and syncopated octatonic pulsations of Jerry Goldsmith's main-title music to the movie, *Escape from the Planet of the Apes* (1971), for example, comprise a deft blend of elements reminiscent of both Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* and jazz-rock.

Stravinsky's characteristic structures, based on ostinato patterns and the interaction or juxtaposition of blocks of sound contrasted by sonority, were alien to traditional concepts of organic musical form, and it was not until Edward T. Cone wrote his pioneering article, 'Stravinsky: The Progress of a Method', in 1962 that analysts began to evolve a more appropriate way of approaching his music. Cone's suggestions provide a helpful starting point in reconsidering Ellington's work since both composers have at times been criticised for what Cone terms 'textural discontinuities', which have always been the life-blood of big-band jazz. In his celebrated analysis of Stravinsky's *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* (1920), Cone proposed concepts of 'stratification', 'interlock' and 'synthesis' through which blocks of discrete musical material are 'separated, interlocked, and eventually unified' (Cone 1962, 21). The musical ideas are essentially fragmentary, and therefore appear incomplete in conventional terms.

An understanding of the relationship between these concepts and the antiphony and riff patterns of jazz is essential to an adequate appreciation of how musical texture functions in much twentieth-century music. As a predominant feature of the swing style, the riff was bitterly resented by revivalists in the 1940s, who failed to see the creative potential such a fragmentary, gestural musical language – at once predictable and unpredictable – might have to offer. As Bernard Gendron has explained:

> On the one hand, the riff, perhaps more than any other musical device, revealed swing to be a simplistic, standardized, consumer package . . . On the other hand, the swing arranger would sometimes use a wide variety of different riffs in one piece to create a complex musical montage, generating an experimental, avant-garde sound, which glaringly excluded such pop requisites as a recurrent and easily recognizable melody. [1995, 44]

The tension between cliché and complexity was fully explored by Bernstein (under strong Stravinskyan influence) in his *Prelude, Fugue and Riffs*, written for Herman in 1949 but premiered by Benny Goodman six years later.

Precisely the same tension was a defining feature of some jazz many years before, and was brilliantly exploited in one of Ellington's most daring works of the swing years: the extraordinary original version of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*, recorded on 20 September 1937. One of Ellington's early experiments in extended jazz form that earned him a bad press at the time, its radical unpredictability ensured that it was not a popular success, and it was only when reinterpreted at the 1956 Newport Festival (in a much diluted version featuring a celebrated extended solo by tenor saxophonist Paul Gonsalves) that it came to wider public attention.[6] The original recording had been singled out for praise in 1938 by Aaron Copland, who (somewhat condescendingly) said of its composer that he 'comes nearer to knowing how

to make a piece hang together' than other jazz musicians (Tucker 1993, 130). Significantly, Copland's own music at times drew rather heavily from Stravinsky's idiom.

In the 1937 version of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*, Ellington's novel structure is an exhilarating demonstration of Rosen's insight that 'the two principal sources of musical energy are dissonance and sequence – the first because it demands resolution, the second because it implies continuation' (1976, 120). By a cunning distortion of jazz clichés, Ellington applies dissonance and sequence in a resourceful scheme of interlocking and unpredictable antiphonal patterns, and creates harmonic instability by founding this highly fragmentary material on the roving changes of a 14-bar blues progression that is transposed several times. Only in the second half of the piece do the metrical and harmonic elements begin to stabilise into more familiar schemes and coalesce into a more conventional climax, and this shift from textural discontinuity to comforting coherence is managed with consummate compositional control.

Max Harrison commented that 'the continuing drive of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* arises from the productive tension between its simple basic materials and their complex treatment' (a comment equally applicable to Stravinsky), and added that 'one almost despairs at its further scope never having been extended on the scale it deserved and with the freedom which composers in the European tradition and its equivalents in America and elsewhere take for granted' (Tucker 1993, 390–91).[7] Harrison is, however, harsher on similar experiments by Ellington in other extended pieces, commenting that the first version of *Creole Rhapsody* (1931) 'consists of essentially a number of fragments . . . which, instead of being related organically, are merely strung together'; the second version is marred by there being 'too many disparate types of gesture in a small space of time' (*ibid.*, 388). Assessing precisely where incoherent rambling stops and masterly unpredictability begins is a challenge still confronting the analyst of twentieth-century music.

Jazzing up the classics, and classicising jazz

The tensions, parallels, contradictions and syntheses between various aspects of jazz and classical music are perhaps most clearly illustrated in numerous attempts to 'jazz up' classical scores, a practice which remains controversial even though it is as old as jazz itself. In the immediate prehistory of jazz, ragtime had been essentially a jazzed-up classical genre: widespread syncopation and (rarely) blue notes enlivened rigid harmonic structures borrowed from the most popular light classical forms of the 1890s

(chiefly marches and duple-time dances) and the somewhat earlier salon music of composers such as Louis Moreau Gottschalk. When James Reese Europe appeared at Carnegie Hall in 1914, he played classical music alongside ragtime, apparently without incongruity (Schuller 1996, 123). In spite of Scott Joplin's attempt to establish ragtime as a new 'classic' genre in its own right, the extemporised embellishments habitually added to it by the first generation of stride pianists resulted in such reactionary titles as *Don't Jazz Me Rag – I'm Music*, published by James Scott in 1922 just as ragtime was pushed terminally out of fashion by the jazz craze. The early jazz pianists who built on the ragtime idiom were generally well versed in classical repertory and frequently applied their keyboard style to specimens drawn from it. The clear influence of Grieg is to be heard in the work of stride pianist Willie 'The Lion' Smith – Ellington's early mentor – and of Debussy in Bix Beiderbecke's piano piece *In a Mist* (1927), while harmonic devices paralleling those of French impressionism steadily crept into the music of dance bands in the later 1920s and remained a potent influence as late as the innovative style of pianist Bill Evans in the 1950s and 1960s.

In New Orleans, the famous Funeral March from Chopin's B♭ minor Piano Sonata was a staple for elaboration in funeral processions – a tradition alluded to when Ellington later quoted from it at the conclusion of *Black and Tan Fantasy*, recorded in 1927. Jelly Roll Morton was well known for his ragtime versions of popular arias from Verdi's operas, and cited an example from *Il Trovatore* in his memoirs (Lomax 1950, 278–9). In Baltimore and New York, flamboyant stride pianists took pride in their knowledge of the classics: Eubie Blake jazzed up the overture to Wagner's *Tannhäuser* and Chopin's Funeral March, and James P. Johnson gave a similar treatment to Grieg's *Peer Gynt*, Rossini's *William Tell* Overture, Rachmaninov's C♯ minor Piano Prelude (which became *Russian Rag*) and Liszt's version of Verdi's *Rigoletto* – the last therefore paraphrasing a paraphrase (Gioia 1997, 97). Whiteman built quotations from famous classical scores into his band arrangements, such as the allusions to Rachmaninov's C♯ minor Prelude in 'Hot Lips' (1922) and to Grieg's 'In the Hall of the Mountain-King' (from *Peer Gynt*) in his 1926 recording of 'St Louis Blues'. Ellington reworked Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2* in 1934, and Larry Clinton gave a jazz treatment to excerpts from Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* in 1940 (Hajdu 1996, 204).

Many of these classical allusions were humorous in intent and, while they too showed the bandleader's knowledge of 'legitimate' music (as Ellington sometimes called it), were by no means out of place in the growing tradition of thematic allusion in other jazz styles. Even in the highly innovative soundworld of Mingus's *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady* (1963), we encounter a quotation from *Peer Gynt*. Interestingly, accusations of pretentiousness have been far more promptly levelled at those jazz musicians who

quote from the classics than at those who build into their improvisations equally prominent and sometimes contrived allusions to popular songs and jazz standards: the abrupt quotation from 'Country Gardens' at the end of Charlie Parker's 8 August 1951 recording of 'Lover Man', for example, is just as designedly silly as Whiteman's chirpy quotation from Grieg. (For further comment on Parker's quotations, see pp. 148–50.) Eric Lott has gone so far as to compare Parker's habitual quoting of 'Woody Woodpecker' with the surreal references to popular music in Mahler's style (1995, 249).

Significantly, those classical scores to have been given a wholesale jazz treatment have tended to be those already popular in their own right, and no longer considered to be elitist in appeal. The circumspect choice of classic 'hits', from Bach to Rodrigo, has increased the commercial value of recordings of these interpretations, while at the same time lessening the likelihood of severe attacks from purist critics from both jazz and classical camps; the humorous stance of many interpretations (e.g., Bob James's hillbilly version of Pachelbel's *Canon* from his 1974 fusion album *One*) disarms heavy criticism. If Bill Evans's choice of music by the Spanish composer Granados as raw material for jazzing-up in 1965 seems more esoteric, this is merely a reflection of changing tastes: Granados's *Goyescas* were a highly popular concert item in the 1960s.[8] Popular classics are often those with straightforward melodic appeal, strongly directional harmonies and uncluttered formal structures, and these features proved readily transferable to many different jazz styles.

Duke Ellington's Scandinavian scandal

Between 28 and 30 June 1960, Ellington and his orchestra recorded in Hollywood their interpretations of movements from Edvard Grieg's incidental music to Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt* (dating from 1874–6), which were released in the UK on a Philips LP (BBL 7470) jocularly subtitled 'Swinging Suites by Edward E. & Edward G'. The Grieg release was a follow-up to Ellington's reworking of material from Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite*, which had been recorded at the same sessions (BBL 7418). The sleeve notes for the Grieg project informed the listener: 'Duke has deep respect for all things of worth, and as a composer he has suffered a thousand times over the things that have been done to his own music through the years. His approach to the music of other composers is the approach he hopes he will receive from interpreters of his own music – a mixture of respect and innovation.' Ellington later recalled: 'We liked what we did, and we had fun doing it, but we did not try to do better than the symphony people. There was a certain amount of humor in it, and unfortunately the Grieg Society in Norway barred it. I don't

think Grieg would have barred it' (1973, 466). In 1969, following a concert in Bergen at the conclusion of a world tour, Ellington told a Norwegian newspaper reporter: 'We shall never play it again. Billy Strayhorn made it with so much love that there is no fun in playing it now that it has been vetoed. Can you think of any bigger fools than us – to put in so much work only to have it refused? I believe that Grieg would not have been offended by our arrangement; he would certainly have taken it cheerfully.'[9] On the last point, Ellington was probably right: Grieg's own view of his *Peer Gynt* music was somewhat ambivalent, and he once reportedly dismissed 'In the Hall of the Mountain-King' for 'reeking of Norwegian cow pats'; its rustic quirkiness had been aped by Whiteman in his quotation from it in 'St Louis Blues'.

The Grieg Foundation in Bergen had prohibited performances in Norway of Ellington's *Peer Gynt* suite on the grounds that it constituted a violation of the original work (still in copyright in Norway in the 1960s but not elsewhere since 1957, the fiftieth anniversary of Grieg's death).[10] Under Norwegian copyright law, a fine could be levied in cases where a work was 'copied in a manner which damages the author's reputation',[11] and the Ellington incident occurred at a time when a strong faction was campaigning for these draconian restrictions to be extended permanently. The extraordinary tension surrounding the Ellington scandal resulted in a nationally televised debate on the subject, broadcast in a prime-time evening slot on Saturday 21 May 1966. The programme was led by Haagen Ringnes and entitled 'Has He Trampled on the Piano?'; it included extracts from the banned *Peer Gynt* music (for the broadcast of which special permission had to be obtained from the Grieg Foundation), which were played alongside the Grieg originals. The programme also featured Ellington's own view, as given in an interview for Swedish television, and a discussion between four Scandinavian composers: Egil Monn-Iversen and Karl-Birger Blomdahl defended Ellington, while Klaus Egge and Harald Sæverud attacked him on behalf of the Grieg Foundation. Blomdahl was Head of Music at Swedish Radio, and had already caused a considerable stir by allowing the broadcast of the complete Ellington *Peer Gynt* suite across the border. He dared to assert that Ellington's version was in some respects superior to Grieg's, and pointed out that banning it was an entirely futile exercise: if it is good it should be heard, while if it is bad it will fall by the wayside anyway, he argued.[12] He also pointedly demonstrated that Grieg had himself plundered material from Mozart and recomposed it in arrangements for two pianos, an observation swiftly echoed by Ellington himself when interviewed by a Norwegian newspaper some months later.[13] On the opposing side, Egge and Sæverud by all accounts acquitted themselves poorly: 'They may both be great composers', wrote one journalist afterwards, 'but

as debaters they wouldn't be able to keep order in a musical nursery school. Sæverud was the worst: he had almost no argument to offer, his arguments consisting for the most part of persistent headshaking.'[14] The inference that the Grieg Foundation's spokesmen considered jazz to be inferior to classical music, hence the allegation of violating the *droit moral* of Grieg's music, was inevitable.

The heated debate (in which Ringnes had, on more than one occasion, to raise his voice in order to make himself heard from the chair) was repeated on Norwegian radio on 9 June, one newspaper on that date carrying a cartoon depicting a couple of young trolls dancing to the sounds of the Ellington orchestra – much to the disgust of a senior troll (see Plate 9.1).[15] Four days after the radio broadcast, Johann Gulbranson wrote in the *Oslo Dagbladet*: 'had the Beatles made a pop version of "The Hall of the Mountain King", it would certainly have avoided censure. If this problem is to be discussed, both parties must absolutely understand Ellington's and Grieg's music.' While memories of the debate remained vivid, Norwegian radio broadcast Ellington's *Nutcracker Suite* on 27 June 1966, lamenting that the *Peer Gynt* suite had only been heard in its entirety on Swedish radio so that no one in Norway could arrive at an informed opinion of its merits.[16] Tetchy correspondence on the matter was published in various newspapers, a supporter of the Grieg Foundation's position alleging that Ellington was guilty of 'artistic vandalism'.[17] One correspondent plaintively asked, 'When shall we Norwegians learn to end this painful national pride? Folk abroad laugh at us.'[18]

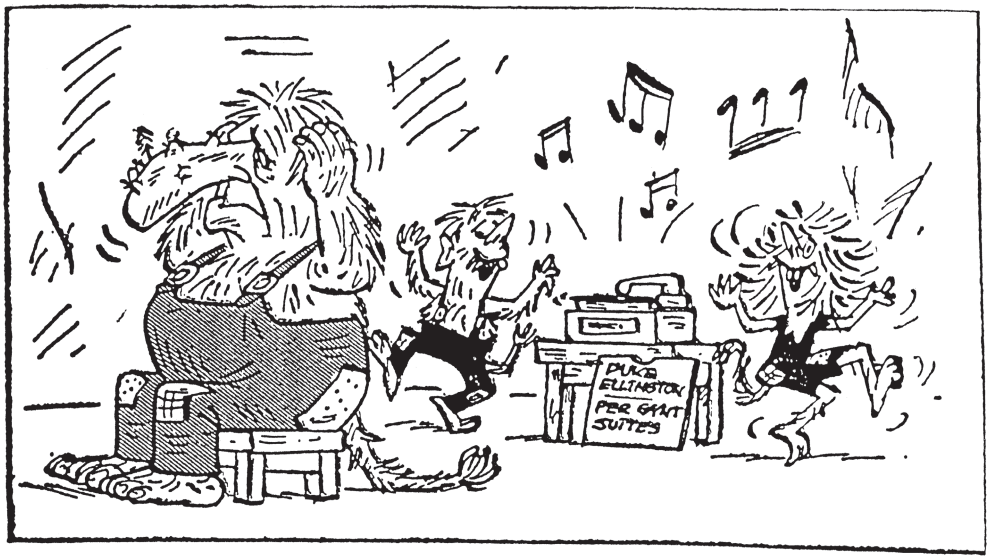

Plate 9.1 Erik Strøyer, cartoon inspired by Duke Ellington's *Peer Gynt* suite (*Arbeiderbladet*, Oslo, 9 June 1966)

In 1967, the copyright restrictions on Grieg's music in Norway finally lapsed, and Ellington's *Peer Gynt* suite was subsequently imported legally on the Columbia Jazz Odyssey label (32160252). Looking back at this incident, it is difficult to see what all the fuss was about. In jazz, the Norwegian 'national pride' has since found a commercially successful outlet in the shape of native saxophonist Jan Garbarek, the bestselling artist on the ECM label: 'the yearning cry of his sax', according to *Down Beat* reviewer Jon Andrews, is 'readily associated with fog-shrouded fjords and Nordic gloom'.[19] Garbarek's engagement with his Scandinavian heritage has involved not only the appropriation of Norwegian folk music, but also the music of Grieg: on *Twelve Moons* (1993), ECM's 500th release (519500-2), he included a plangent interpretation of the 'Arietta' from Grieg's *Lyric Pieces*. The critical acclaim accorded this album suggests that such appropriations are now viewed as entirely acceptable, especially in cases where the performer hails from the same cultural heritage as the music being appropriated and serves as an international ambassador for it. Garbarek's phenomenally successful *Officium* (1993) took medieval vocal music as its starting point, and it too managed to avoid offending listeners' historically conditioned sensibilities.

Discussing the newly imported recording of Ellington's *Peer Gynt* in the *Arbeiderbladet* on 31 May 1969, one reviewer perceptively pointed out that, while Grieg's famous 'Morning Mood' had a special resonance for Norwegian listeners, they tended to overlook the fact that it was inspired by an African wasteland in the original context of Ibsen's play (for which setting it is not, perhaps, especially appropriate); he went on to declare, 'why shouldn't Ellington's musicians think themselves in morning mood after a long night's work?' The review concluded: 'Duke Ellington and his musicians . . . have shaped a whole new tonal world out of Grieg's raw materials.' Since Ellington's 'tonal world' has traditionally been regarded as one of the strongest and most enduring idioms in jazz, it is instructive to examine precisely how Ellington and Strayhorn adapted their Nordic raw material to their own ends.[20]

The choice of Grieg as raw material was canny, not only for the obvious reason that the Grieg was already sufficiently popular a classic as to guarantee widespread interest in the venture, but more subtly because Grieg's compositional style is generally straightforward and free from complex structures and intellectual posturing (hence its popularity, one might argue). These observations apply equally to Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite*, the source for Ellington's previous classical project. Both Grieg and Tchaikovsky are celebrated melodists, and both have been criticised at times for their lack of structural sophistication. Because of this, it is much harder to take Ellington to task for destroying or distorting the original musical structures than it

might have been had he chosen to rework the music of a more esoteric composer. The lack of organic 'development' (and reliance on simple sequential patterns) sometimes singled out for comment in Grieg and Tchaikovsky, which we have already shown to have been a misapplied preoccupation in the case of criticisms of jazz styles, was a positive advantage for Ellington's purposes. In Grieg's *Peer Gynt*, structures based on simple repetition include 'Morning Mood', 'Åse's Death', 'In the Hall of the Mountain-King' and 'Solveig's Song'. Both Grieg and Tchaikovsky savour local harmonic colouring (both are fond of augmented triads, for example, as was Ellington: see 'Morning Mood'), and the French augmented-sixth chords in 'Åse's Death' (e.g., bar 5) and the chromatic elaboration of 'Solveig's Song' (e.g., bars 18–24) would have appealed to Ellington, and are indeed lingered over in his versions of the Grieg originals.

Ellington's suite is organised schematically, alternating movements in slow tempo and lively swing style. 'Morning Mood' (No. 1) is, apart from a brief chordal introduction to establish the atmosphere, a bar-by-bar reworking of Grieg's original. The slow tempo and lack of swing are compensated for by Ellington's trademark richness in the bottom stratum of the texture (low saxophones and bowed double bass) and ominously pulsating cross-rhythms on tom-toms that are immediately suggestive of the Duke's famed 'jungle' style – a dash of exoticism that hints at the African setting of the relevant Ibsen context more than Grieg's original. Above this sensuous foundation, Grieg's melody is played without alteration by Paul Gonsalves (tenor saxophone), Jimmy Hamilton (clarinet) and finally Harry Carney (baritone saxophone). Improvised decoration (on clarinet) is reserved for the climactic moment at which Grieg's harmony is at its most static. The return of the main theme is subjected to an ingenious and lush chromatic reharmonisation; modernistic distortion reminiscent of Stravinsky is reserved for the eccentric trombone reworking of Grieg's evocative horn calls towards the conclusion. 'Åse's Death' (No. 4) reinstates the 'jungle' percussion from No. 1 and takes the same strictly bar-by-bar approach: it is little more than a reorchestration of the original material, albeit distinguished by the same characteristically Ellingtonian attention to rich sonorities sited low in the texture.

'In the Hall of the Mountain-King' (No. 2) is given a more liberal interpretation, replete with rich saxophone homophony and metrically disruptive unison riffs entirely typical of big-band swing. Grieg's melody is repeated over and over again in the original, so a jazz structure varying a set of repeating chord changes is a logical initiative. The bass line deftly changes function throughout (switching from main melody to walking bass to pedal notes and back), while the upper strata of the texture become increasingly complex in their antiphonal trading of abstract riff patterns based directly

on the theme, recalling the heady textural discontinuity of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*. Ellington's analytical approach to his raw material is seen in the increasing abstraction of the interval of a rising semitone (the inversion of the falling chromatic patterns characterising Grieg's melody), isolated in the brief and stark coda for piano solo.

After an introduction virtually identical to Grieg's, the main theme of 'Solveig's Song' (No. 3) is transposed to sit comfortably as a high trombone solo in the 'ya-ya' vocalising style pioneered in Ellington's band by Joe 'Tricky Sam' Nanton decades before (and here imitated by Booty Woods). Straightforward arrangements of this melancholic theme, with some striking double-time chromatic reharmonisation, alternate with major sections in which Jimmy Hamilton's 'very "legitimate" clarinet'[21] supplies a decorated version of Grieg's subsidiary theme (its triple metre converted into a faster quadruple swing pattern); the trombone riffs directly recall the brass interjections in Ellington's *It Don't Mean a Thing (If it Ain't Got That Swing)* of 1932. As with No. 1, Grieg's straightforward original structure (here a simple ABA′B′ form) is fully respected.

The final movement, 'Anitra's Dance' (No. 5), strikes an optimal balance between respect for the original structure and subtle reorganisation, and is arguably the most interesting experiment in the suite. Grieg's highly conventional rounded binary form (two halves, each repeated, with the second incorporating a modified recapitulation of the first) provides the foundation for Ellington's version. The A section is repeated in full, as in the Grieg, but with additional embellishment from a solo saxophone; but the B section is shortened so that it is repeated *before* the recapitulation of the main theme occurs, and the phrase lengths are subtly manipulated to make the harmonic sequences seem less predictable and four-square than in the original version; the dominant preparation for the recapitulation is also lengthened by Ellington for additional emphasis. In Ellington's version, the recapitulation is as a result heard only once instead of twice, and carries a correspondingly greater impact, leading directly into the catchy coda. The latter is based on the introduction, and the ease with which Ellington transforms a fragment of Grieg's melody into a catchy riff pattern shows how naturally the process of adaptation came to him; the simple ingenuity with which the metrical dislocation inherent in this transformation creates a modernistic feeling without unduly compromising the character of the original is impressive.

Ellington's and Strayhorn's reworking of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite* is more radical in technique and satisfying in content than *Peer Gynt*, yet Ellington noted that it had not been met by a single critical objection at the time of its release.[22] This was in spite of the ostensibly (but misleadingly) flippant attitude towards the source material suggested by the heavy puns in

certain of Ellington's titles, as shown in the following table (which also gives the location of Tchaikovsky's dance movements in the published suite):

Ellington (1960)	**Tchaikovsky, Op. 71a (1892)**
1. Overture	Ouverture miniature (No. I)
2. Toot toot tootie toot	Danse des Mirlitons (No. IIf)
3. Peanut Brittle Brigade	Marche (No. IIa)
4. Sugar Rum Cherry	Danse de la Fée-Dragée (No. IIb) [Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy]
5. Entr'acte	–
6. The Volga Vouty	Danse Russe Trepak (No. IIc)
7. Chinoiserie	Danse Chinoise (No. IIe)
8. Dance of the Floreadores	Valse des Fleurs (No. III)
9. Arabesque Cookie	Danse Arabe (No. IId)

This is a much more substantial venture than *Peer Gynt*. Ellington not only includes all the movements from Tchaikovsky's suite – adding, as the fifth movement, a recapitulation of the first not to be found in the original – but also re-orders the movements (as he had in the Grieg suite) with careful attention to balance and contrast, and with a clear desire to end enigmatically rather than in the grand flourishes of the 'Waltz of the Flowers' that closes the original Tchaikovsky sequence. As with the Grieg suite, Ellington juxtaposes movements in swing style with more relaxed and reflective pieces. The up-tempo swing movements are nos. 1, 3, 5, 6 and 8; perhaps predictably, these contain more jazz clichés than the slower movements, and the rambling riff patterns of 'Peanut Brittle Brigade' and 'Dance of the Floreadores', and the uninspired trumpet and clarinet solos in the former, are the low points of the work. The 'Overture', however, makes a greater impact as its deployment of big-band clichés is such a stark contrast to the gossamer lightness of the unorthodox scoring in Tchaikovsky's 'Ouverture miniature' (which lacks lower strings throughout), and Ellington makes a few deft alterations to the original structure. As in the Grieg suite, brief improvised solos are generally reserved for moments when the music is otherwise static or for the second statement of a theme that is immediately repeated; the most impressive solos are to be found in the recapitulation of the overture ('Entr'acte'), where they are accompanied by just bass and drums in a small-group texture that provides a welcome contrast at the centre-point of the suite.

Elsewhere, the recomposition is brilliantly inventive and unpredictable. As in the overture, much depends for its effect on the fact that the original scoring of certain of the dances is so well known. Thus the delicately fluttering flute trio of Tchaikovsky's 'Danse des Mirlitons' is transformed by Ellington into a squealing horn ascent with acerbic wrong-note harmony, with a strikingly modernistic introduction again recalling Stravinsky. Similarly, the tip-toeing celeste of the 'Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy' wittily metamorphoses into a ponderous and drunkenly lurching idea for low saxophones with support from trademark 'jungle' drumming. This movement, too, ends in fragmentation, suggesting that Ellington (no doubt

subconsciously) approached his material with a clear distinction between swing-band stereotype in the fast movements and modernistic compositional techniques in the slow movements. Fragmentation also closes 'Chinoiserie', another of the more radical movements with its dislocated clarinet/saxophone heterophony (inspired by the original and paralleling the Mirliton reworking), dissonant bass interjections and quartal piano chords. The decision to locate Tchaikovsky's 'Arab Dance' at the end of the suite allows Ellington to close the work with a strikingly understated ending, in which the texture is gradually dismantled to leave just bass and tambourine in isolation.

Critics have either ignored Ellington's 'classical' suites, or roundly panned them. In a savage example of the latter extreme, Harrison declared:

> Altogether more desperate [than Ellington's other 1960s suites] as attempts at maintaining stylistic consistency over several movements were Ellington's grotesque assaults on major and minor European masters. The complaint is not about 'jazzing the classics', for the originals survive intact for those who want them. Rather is the complaint that he could, in these cases, find nothing better to do with his unique powers. It is a very long way down from great adventures like *Reminiscing in Tempo* [1935] to the contemptible Tchaikovsky and Grieg manipulations of 1960.
>
> [Tucker 1993, 393]

Harrison does not support his dismissal of these 'contemptible' and 'grotesque' ventures with specific musical evidence or rational argument and, given his positive insights into Ellington's earlier style, it seems likely that (*pace* his careful assertion to the contrary) the complaint really *is* about his 'jazzing the classics' by daring to 'assault' the sacred bastions of the classical canon.

Although one's opinion on the viability of such ventures is likely (for the foreseeable future, at any rate) to be so deeply rooted in matters of personal taste and canonical issues that objective assessment is virtually impossible, commentators might nevertheless do well to avoid the pitfall of allowing their extramusical preoccupations to colour their critical judgement. When Stravinsky transformed and distorted Pergolesi's Baroque melodies in his influential neo-classical ballet, *Pulcinella* (1919), we are told that the work's commissioner, the impresario Diaghilev, initially took offence and 'went about for a long time with a look that suggested "The Offended Eighteenth Century"'.[23] Today Stravinsky's score seems an unpretentious, freshly modern and certainly inoffensive reinterpretation of Baroque stylistic conventions, through which the force of Stravinsky's characteristic rhythmic and harmonic techniques always shines. In the case of Ellington's *Peer Gynt*, and

even more so in the *Nutcracker Suite*, precisely the same situation obtains: the strength of Ellington's musical personality is imprinted on all his borrowed material and lends the reinterpretations a coherent character that entirely obviates the slightest criticism of his having violated the specious 'integrity' of the music on which the projects were based.

The same holds true for Miles Davis's and Gil Evans's interpretation of 'Gone' on their Gershwin-inspired album *Porgy and Bess* (1958), for example, which is a far more radical reworking of the original material than either of Ellington's suites, yet has never received the same barrage of criticism – undoubtedly because Gershwin's spirit is deemed to be closer to that of jazz than either Grieg's or Tchaikovsky's. This assumption may readily be dispelled by any intelligent examination of Gershwin's technical and aesthetic preoccupations, which were far more closely aligned to those of the classical composer he self-confessedly aspired to be. Our view of Ellington's general aspirations and achievements should be conditioned by the same awareness, and a refusal to give in to the still-prevalent myth of the incompatibility of jazz and the classics, whether in terms of musical technique, aesthetic outlook, or racial and sociological factors. A glance through Ellington's autobiography reveals that he was preoccupied throughout his career with musical issues that centred on craftsmanship, education, intellectualism, taste, and on a type of jazz that 'has grown up and become quite scholastic' (1973, 47) and which, in the hands of Strayhorn, shall survive as a legacy that 'will never be less than the ultimate on the highest plateau of culture' (*ibid.*, 161). Ellington's manager, Irving Mills, used this stance as a marketing tool as early as 1934 when he advised his clients to 'Sell Ellington as a great artist, a musical genius whose unique style and individual theories of harmony have created a new music. Sell his orchestra as a class attraction' (Nicholson, 1999, 153).

In his well-known analysis of Sonny Rollins's *Blue 7* in 1958, Schuller fired a broadside at those jazz purists who seemed to resent the then increasingly intellectual nature of modern jazz: he defined jazz intellectualism as 'the power of reason and comprehension as distinguished from *purely* intuitive emotional outpouring', and saw nothing wrong with those of its listeners (and exponents) who approached jazz with 'a roughly five-hundred-year-old musical idea, the notion of thematic and structural unity' (1996, 94). There can be no doubt that Ellington's views were broadly similar, though one may regret that the stunning originality of structural control in his early work later became replaced by the self-conscious and sometimes crude 'thematic unity' of diffusely extended works such as the *First Sacred Concert* (1965). It is difficult to believe that he would have agreed with Jed Rasula's assertion that the attempt to canonise jazz as part of Eurocentric culture is 'the *dominating fantasy* (and let me emphasize the domination) of the

predominantly white world of jazz criticism and history' (1995, 153), for the simple reason that Ellington – and many other black jazz composers, for that matter – saw nothing wrong with inclusion in the classical canon, and indeed sometimes actively sought it. For Ellington, critical acclaim at Carnegie Hall was not something of which to be ashamed: 'our series there had helped establish a music that was new in both its extended forms and its social significance' (1973, 190).

Few jazz musicians have been subjected to (sometimes far-fetched) parallels with classical composers as was Ellington, who has variously been compared with Bach, Delius, Haydn, Mozart, Palestrina, Ravel, Rimsky-Korsakov, Schoenberg, Schubert and Strauss. Although he dismissed some of these comparisons as existing 'only in the minds of self-important, oversophisticated musicologists', he nevertheless added that 'Brahms, Beethoven, Debussy and others of their calibre . . . have furnished us with wholesome musical patterns in our minds and have given us a definite basis upon which to judge all music, regardless of its origin' (Tucker 1993, 247). As Bill Evans put it, this compatibility ensures that jazz is 'in touch with the universal language of understanding in music'. One of the most memorable thumbnail descriptions of jazz is Lorenzo Thomas's assertion that the music is 'an extraordinary edifice of intellectualism balanced on the working-class eloquence of the blues' (258), and it is the tension of that balancing act that has always made the best jazz such a vital and all-embracing aesthetic experience.