

Notes for Such Sweet Thunder

by Adrian Cho. Reproduced from the programme notes for the "The Duke & The Bard," Impressions in Jazz Orchestra, June 12, 2007

Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn

Few artists have enjoyed as close a working relationship as did Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn. The two met in Pittsburg following an Ellington Orchestra performance in 1938. Strayhorn played some of his own compositions, including "Lush Life," which he had completed a year earlier at the age of twenty-one. Ellington hired him on the spot but without a clear agreement as to just what it was he was hiring him to do! Nor was the arrangement formalized over the course of the next thirty years. Ellington once said, "...Billy Strayhorn was my right arm, my left arm, all the eyes in the back of my head, my brainwaves in his head, and his in mine."

In many ways, the two men were distinct opposites: Ellington, suave and sophisticated; Strayhorn almost painfully shy and retiring. Ellington thrived in the limelight while Strayhorn tended to avoid the spotlight. Yet together, they functioned so smoothly that one was hard pressed, in any given composition, to identify where Ellington's work ended and Strayhorn's began.

Edward Kennedy (Duke) Ellington began his career painting signs, but soon formed his own dance band, the Washingtonians, named for his home town of Washington D.C. Ellington took his band to New York City where he landed a regular gig at Harlem's The Cotton Club. Via the new medium of Radio, Ellington's popularity soared and his small dance band evolved into an accomplished and thoroughly professional orchestra worthy of its leader's complex and highly innovative creations.

William Thomas (Billy) Strayhorn was born in Dayton, Ohio on November 28, 1915 and raised in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. Drawn to the piano from the time he could climb atop a piano bench, the shy and talented Strayhorn immersed himself in music, arranging, composing, and performing in his own group, "The Madhatters" formed in 1937. Strayhorn would emerge as an often under recognized but essential element in Ellington's artistic success. While remembered for his popular compositions such as *Take the A Train*, *Chelsea Bridge*, and *Something to Live For*," it was, perhaps, Strayhorn's mastery of classical music that would prove most invaluable in his collaborations with The Duke.

Together, their keen interest and proficiency in classical music would spur the creative energy and genius behind such sophisticated symphonic jazz works as *The Queen's Suite*, *The Far East Suite*, and of course, *Such Sweet Thunder*.

Such Sweet Thunder

Such Sweet Thunder, also known as Ellington's *Shakespearean Suite*, is a twelve-movement work that was first performed in its entirety at the Stratford Festival in Ontario on September 5, 1957. Although there was an earlier debut at Town Hall in New York on 28 April 1957, the day before Ellington's 58th birthday, the suite was incomplete with only eleven of the twelve movements written. At that time, Ellington was consumed by another major work, *A Drum Is A Woman* and the eleventh movement was only completed on the day of the Town Hall performance.

While there is considerable evidence that Ellington rushed *Such Sweet Thunder* to completion, the work and the recording made in 1957 are simply brilliant. It is considered by many to be the greatest work Ellington (and Strayhorn) wrote.

The story of the suite began in 1956 when Ellington was performing at the Stratford Festival in Ontario. He was so enamoured with the Shakespearean scene that he immediately decided he would write a suite. Irving Townsend in the original LP liner notes quoted Ellington's description of the suite as an "attempt to parallel the vignettes of some of the Shakespearean characters in miniature—sometimes to the point of caricature."

To get into the world of Shakespeare, Ellington began by asking Barbara Reid, a publicist with the Stratford Festival, to compile summaries of the various plays for him. It appears, however, that he also did his reading. In his biography, *Music Is My Mistress*, Ellington said that he and Strayhorn "read Shakespeare quite thoroughly," a fact attested to by Strayhorn himself, Duke's son Mercer and others.

The music itself was written in a two to three week period although some of the pieces already existed under different titles. Most of the writing, however, was entirely new and in many ways unique even for Ellington. Although, as Strayhorn pointed out, they simply couldn't cover all of Shakespeare's prolific output, they did manage to reference over ten of the Bard's plays, depicting characters, scenes, and events and even writing musical sonnets that would reflect the rhythm and form of the literary sonnets.

One of the wonderful things that make this work a joy to both listen to and perform is the great wealth of solo opportunities. At various times, the instruments act as specific characters and recite the musical equivalent of Shakespeare's text. This gives performers the opportunity to truly speak through their respective instruments. The ensemble sections provide the background and help paint the pictures and set the moods. As one would expect, the rich and diverse world of Shakespeare's collective output is reflected in a suite that is as equally diverse in its musical styles and textures.

In translating the Bard's works into their brand of music, Ellington and Strayhorn proved how truly cool Shakespeare's plays are by imparting a certain *hipness* to the characters that could only be achieved with jazz. As Ellington said: "*Shakespeare is down*" and is "*dug by the craziest of cats.*"

Such Sweet Thunder Analysis

Instead of listening to the tracks in the order they are presented on the 1957 recording, Jack Chambers, the distinguished professor of linguistics at the University of Toronto, who is also well known for his writings about jazz, suggests that we group the pieces thematically.

It is important to discuss Ellington and Strayhorn's musical sonnets. The composers attempted to mirror both the meter of Shakespeare's poetry and the sonnet form. Shakespearean sonnets are comprised of 14 lines divided into three quatrains and a final couplet which is the punch-line. Each line is recited in *iambic pentameter* which is five feet (pairs of syllables) of alternating weak and strong stresses. For example, say:

da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM

or to recite Shakespeare:

How oft when thou, my music, music play'st

In the musical sonnets, each line is recited over two bars of music for a total of twenty-eight bars (beginning when the soloist enters). The pieces are through-composed and recited entirely by one instrumentalist. Every even-numbered bar ends with a tied note which corresponds to the rhyming word at the end of each line. In the final four bars of the solo which correspond to the final couplet in a Shakespearean sonnet, the melodic range is raised over stop-time and/or suspended chords.

It is interesting to note that in jazz, one of the meanings of the term *swing* is the manner in which the eighth notes are played with the first of each pair being long and the second short. A stress on the shorter eighth notes, provides forward propulsion to the melodic lines and the music. This is the way in which jazz is naturally played and it fits beautifully with iambic poetry in which the second syllable of the iambic foot is stressed.

The musical sonnets while being somewhat mechanical in their writing allow the soloist to fairly speak in a *recitativo* style as if reciting Shakespeare.

OVERTURE

1. *Such Sweet Thunder*

Plays: *Othello*

The title comes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in which Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons describes the sound of the Spartan hunting dogs as “*so musical a discord, such sweet thunder.*” Yet the subject of the piece is Othello and specifically what Ellington said was “*the sweet and swinging, very convincing story Othello told Desdemona.*” Those stories are not actually written in the play although Othello does describe them.

The piece opens with the “Othello” theme sporting a funky pseudo-tango rhythm and a definite heroic swagger. It pits the pep section of two muted trumpets and a trombone, against the rest of the ensemble. It is notable that Othello being a Moor, was one of the few Black characters in Shakespeare’s plays. Much of Ellington’s prolific output was dedicated to telling the story of *his* people, the African-American people. In this music, Othello is not just a hero, he kicks butt and does it all the while looking and acting cool. He is portrayed not unlike one of the modern action heroes in films who dispenses with a pesky character and then throws out a smart quip immediately after.

The cornet solo is the sweet love song with which Othello wooed Desdemona. Immediately afterwards, the strident and brassy ensemble section portrays the tragedy of the play. The lyrical trombone solo underpinned by the ornamented bass lines is the quietest part in the piece and represents the post-tragedy aftermath in which Othello realizes what he has done. The swinging Othello theme returns to remind us of the hero and the stories he told Desdemona.

HISTORY

2. *Sonnet for Hank Cinq*

Plays: *Henry V*

Ellington noted that in this very challenging trombone solo, “*the changes of tempo have to do with the changes of pace and the map as a result of wars.*” Henry V’s ambition is represented by both the ambitious leaps in the melodic line and the always forward momentum in the ensemble writing. It is interesting to note Ellington’s choice of title as but one example in which the English setting of Shakespeare is transferred to the American home of jazz. “Henry” becomes “Hank” and “the Fifth” becomes the anti-English French “*cinq.*”

3. *Half the Fun*

Plays: *Antony & Cleopatra*

Ellington said of this piece that “*the mood was specific*” and he provided it with a musical depiction of Cleopatra seducing Mark Antony. The setting is suggestive of Cleo atop her barge surrounded by her entourage. The 32nd notes in the snare drum part suggest a rattlesnake, the American equivalent of the asp that bit Cleopatra. Ellington, describing the scene to his drummer said: “*Imagine this great golden barge floating down the Nile River: beautiful dancing girls, mounds of food and drink, elephants, ostrich feather fans, a hundred slaves rowing the barge and Cleopatra is lying on a satin bed.*”

4. The Telecasters

Plays: *Macbeth* and *Othello*

Ellington took license in this one. He noted that “*We took the liberty of combining characters from two plays. It seems that the three witches and Iago had something in common in that they all had something to say, so we call them the Telecasters.*” The witches from *Macbeth* are depicted by the trio of trombones and the baritone sax is a fitting Iago. The witches state their villainous intents from the beginning with a series of fanfares in a series of call and responses with a sinister bass which then proceeds to set a mood of mystery. The witches and Iago then have their says complete with long rests of silence for dramatic effect.

COMEDY

5. Sonnet for Sister Kate

Plays: *Taming of the Shrew*

The plunger muted trombone is perfect for a lament by “Sister Kate.” A subset of the saxophones help set the sombre mood.

6. Up and Down, Up and Down (I Will Lead Them Up and Down)

Plays: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

This is clearly one of the masterpieces of the suite and one of the most difficult to perform. In a seven-voice fugue, Puck, represented by the solo trumpet, gets up to no end of mischief, causing great confusion amongst the lovers Demetrius and Helena, Lysander and Hermia and Oberon and Titania, who are depicted by the clarinets, alto and tenor saxophones, violin and valve trombone. From the very beginning, the dissonant contrapuntal chaos tells the story of the romantic mix-ups. Puck is laughing merrily throughout it all and ends the piece with a final quip. On the original LP recording (but not on the CD release), soloist Clark Terry vocalised the famous quotation “*Lord what fools these mortals be*” through half-valves on his horn after the piece had concluded.

ROMANCE

7. Sonnet in Search of A Moor

Plays: *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*

A clarinet trio provides support for the bass which is a worthy voice for a noble Moor. Ellington, taking a page out of Shakespeare’s book of double and triple literary meanings said that: “*The sonnet to a Moor was a triple entendre, because you had to decide whether we were talking about Othello [the Moor of Venice], or whether we were talking about love [amour], or we were talking about the moors where the three witches were, you know.*” For our purposes we chose the first two of three meanings, hence the readings in which two women express their love for their respective Moors.

8. The Star-Crossed Lovers

Plays: *Romeo & Juliet*

Ellington said “*This is the sad story of two beautiful people.*” Love and tragedy are depicted in this not soppy but rather very moving piece. Lush textures demanding plenty of sweet and warm vibrato, support one of the most famous solos from the Ellington book. While this piece belongs very much to the lead alto playing the role of Juliet, don’t miss the section where the second tenor playing Romeo, has the lead in a saxophone sectional.

TRAGEDY

9. *Sonnet for Caesar*

Plays: *Julius Caesar*

In this slow imperial march, the trombones sing the solemn and foreboding chords that tell of Caesar's tragedy. The drums add the military theme and the bass plays foreboding double-stops. Together they all march a dirge toward's Caesar's demise in a piece that is soft yet very intense.

The piece belongs to the clarinet with an almost motionless line representing either Caesar's wife Calphurnia and/or the soothsayer ("*beware the Ides of March*") both of whom warn Caesar of the dangers that lie ahead.

10. *Lady Mac*

Plays: *Macbeth*

In a surprising depiction of Lady Macbeth, Ellington who said "*Though she was a lady of noble birth, we suspect there was a little ragtime in her soul,*" uses a jazz waltz to great effect. The piece begins with the piano supported by the bass and from there the piece features great interplay between all the sections of the orchestra. The dynamic drops for a sweet second alto solo and an equally sweet flugelhorn solo. Ascending lines and trumpets lead the ensemble into a rousing finale.

11. *Madness in Great Ones*

Plays: *Hamlet*

Another great masterpiece of the suite in which the high range of the lead trumpet is used to great effect in a portrayal of Hamlet feigning madness for the benefit of his stepfather. This piece is all about drama. From the very top it features much action, confusion and desperation. It builds to a great climax and just when you think it can't get any crazier, the lead trumpet goes stratospheric.

FINALE

12. *Circle of Fourths*

In the final movement of the suite which features the lead tenor, Ellington paid tribute to the depth and breadth of the Bard's work in its four parts: tragedy, comedy, history and the sonnets. The circle of fourths is the ring of musical keys linked by intervals of a fourth. With the key changing every two bars and a snappy pace, the soloist leads the band through a brisk tour of the Shakespearean landscape culminating in a cadenza and the customary big finish.

Sources:

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