

The Revival of an early "Crossover" Masterwork

Duke Ellington's
Sacred Concerts

Thomas Lloyd

Editor's note: The musical example for Figure 5 can be found on the ACDA Web site. Click on the interactive link on the *Choral Journal* page <www.acda.org/publications/choral_journal>.

"Every man prays in his own language, and there is no language that God does not understand." - Duke Ellington, from "Third Sacred Concert"

Duke Ellington's three full-evening jazz suites, known as his *Sacred Concerts*, are now recognized as the central creative focus of the last decade in the life of one of America's greatest composers. During Ellington's lifetime performances of these three works for jazz big band, full choir, vocal soloists, and dancers were major artistic and cultural events, performed for huge audiences in the United States and Europe. A combination of incomplete performing materials and the genre-crossing nature of the music, however, has left this inspired and important body of work without a natural home in the repertoire. Yet, a wave of recent performances by professional and community choral ensembles has given new life to music that reminds us how the live

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concert experience is still unique and irreplaceable in a musical world dominated by recordings.

A published complete and accurate set of parts for the *Sacred Concerts* is not currently available. The original recordings, under Ellington's direction, are available for the first and second concerts, but not the third. Though produced by musicians close to Ellington near the time of the performances, the only published vocal score is an abbreviated reduction, and has been out of print for years (though still available in many libraries). A rental edition of the vocal score and band charts is currently available from G. Schirmer, but for only about half the original numbers. These charts reflect, for the most part, a direct transcription of the early recordings of the concerts, but the music evolved a great deal after those first performances, making these scores far from definitive or free from significant errors. We know from surviving performers and materials that the music was revised significantly from performance to performance. The only publicly available notated record we have of these changes is the incomplete and loosely organized parts in the Ellington Collection at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. Some performers involved directly in the original tour concerts believe that a complete set of charts could be reconstructed from parts still in the hands of the estates of arrangers now deceased who worked directly with Ellington on the *Sacred Concerts*. The all-too-common legal complications between those closely associated with Ellington and the publishers who now hold the rights, however, have prevented these sets from being made available to the public.¹

The music of the *Sacred Concerts* also defies categorization. The nature of the choral writing was unprecedented both for jazz and within the choral repertoire. Much of the solo vocal writing calls for classical control as much as for jazz finesse. The music is self-consciously sacred, but its jazz idiom and the idiosyncratic language and theology of Ellington's

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original texts have resisted acceptance by many Christian churches. Even some of the harmonic language and orchestration of the purely instrumental numbers has been a challenge for jazz aficionados in relation to Ellington's earlier compositions.²

Yet, in spite of these odds, Ellington's orphaned masterworks have seen a flurry of performances just within the last year, both by professional ensembles: the Los Angeles Master Chorale under Grant Gershon and VocalEssence directed by Phillip Brunelle, and smaller community choirs such as the Brookline Chorus (MA) directed by Lisa Graham and the Choristers of Upper Dublin (PA) under the baton of David Spitko.

As a result, a reassessment of the striking originality of these works is in order. Drawing on recent experience, performing these works with college and community choirs, this article will advance the view that despite the

practical challenges of working with the limited resources available, deeply gratifying performances of these great works are still quite possible.

Duke Ellington's Religious Background

As a child, Ellington attended church twice each Sunday: one service with his mother at her Methodist Church, where the choir sang restrained European anthems and arrangements of the Spirituals, and the other with his father at a traditional Baptist church, where gospel singing and improvisation "raised the roof."³ When his musical night life began in his late teens, he no longer attended church regularly, and was fully immersed in the cabaret life in which most jazz musicians neces-

sarily found their living.

But Ellington also made a point of telling everyone that he had read through the Bible four times.⁴ He was a regular subscriber and reader of the Episcopal Church's weekly inspirational magazine *Forward*, after having been given a copy by Ethel Rich, a professor at Milton College in Wisconsin.⁵ And on his tours, he befriended a number of priests and pastors, in particular the legendary "pastor to the jazz community," John Gensel of St. Peter's Lutheran Church in New York, founder of the Jazz Vespers series and a jazz program that flourishes to this day.⁶ One of the movements of the second *Sacred Concert*, "The Shepherd Who Watches over the Night Flock," is a musical portrait of Gensel.⁷

The Emergence of Sacred Jazz in the 1960s

One of the pastors who befriended Ellington was the Reverend Jack Yaryan of the Anglican Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Yaryan convinced the Dean of the cathedral, Reverend Julian Bartlett, to commission a concert of sacred jazz from Ellington and his band as part of a concert series in 1965 that also included Britten's *War Requiem*, a performance of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* with choreography, and a mass accompanied by the jazz instrumentals of the Vince Guaraldi Trio.⁸

The burst of liturgical innovation that followed the ground-breaking reforms of Vatican II in the early 1960s resulted in a few efforts to bring jazz into the Roman Catholic liturgy by composers such as Frank Tirro, Edgar Sommerlin, and Mary Lou Williams.⁹ Around the same time, a complete jazz setting of the Jewish liturgy was written by seventeen-year-old Jonathan Klein for his rabbi father's Temple Emanuel in Worcester Massachusetts, and was recorded in

New York in 1968 by emerging jazz stars Herbie Hancock, Thad Jones, Ron Carter, and Grady Tate.¹⁰

Since that time, there have been several composers following Ellington's lead in composing large-scale sacred jazz works. The jazz pianist Dave Brubeck has composed a large body of sacred choral works, though, in most of these, the choir primarily sings music written in a modernist classical style rather than in a jazz idiom.¹¹ Jazz legend Billy Taylor was commissioned by Tufts University in 1980 to write a work in the style of the *Sacred Concerts* called *Make a Joyful Noise* and later was commissioned by Vocal Essence to write an homage to Martin Luther King titled *The Peaceful Warrior*.¹² Philadelphia-based pianist, organist, and composer Trudy Pitts wrote a full-length jazz cantata in 1996, *A Joyful Noise*, though the chorus here serves primarily a backup role.¹³ Hannibal Lokumbe has written three major jazz cantatas with a historical orientation, involving substantial choral parts.¹⁴ More recently, composer and conductor Carl MaultsBy [*sic*] wrote a remarkable "jazz requiem" titled *Strong and Graceful Oaks* for his Rejoice Ensemble in New York City, devoted to the performance of sacred vocal jazz literature.¹⁵

Ellington was not writing music to be used in the main liturgical service of the week, but in a concert setting, albeit one that was held in the church and as such intended to be devotional in nature. This venue gave him the creative freedom to incorporate the full-blown forces of big band jazz, vocal soloists, large choirs singing in jazz style, and dancers. This non-liturgical setting also allowed him the freedom to set mostly his own original texts, in his own distinctively personal, colloquial language.

Putting such highly charged, openly emotive music into a sacred context, even outside a worship service, was considered quite daring, even at a time

when many other cultural shibboleths were openly challenged. In many churches, including most traditional black churches where gospel music reigned supreme, jazz was still tainted by its association with the hedonism of the night clubs and brothels from which it emerged in the not-so-distant past and with the high life of the dance halls of the more recent big band era. It was no accident that the first sacred jazz performances were in urban cathedrals or churches such as St. Peter's Lutheran Church in New York. These churches had missions with a broader, more ecumenical reach than churches more closely tied to particular communities.

The Origins of the First Sacred Concert

For the Grace Cathedral San Francisco commission, Ellington merged five new movements with five previous compositions, four of which were from *My People* (1963), along with "Come Sunday," from *Black, Brown, and Beige* (1943). "Come Sunday" was written first as a solo for saxophonist Johnny Hodges before being given sacred lyrics for Mahalia Jackson in 1958. These earlier works were extended "jazz suites," portraying the history of the African-American people. Grounded in his family upbringing and his experience growing up in the black church, pride in his black heritage, and the struggle for justice and freedom became natural themes for these extended works, as they were again in the *Sacred Concerts*.¹⁶

The freshly composed "In the Beginning God" was the ambitious opening number, a twenty-minute extended composition for the band and baritone soloist based on a six-note motive for the words of the title, the first words in the Bible. The movement contains riveting choral incantations of the names of all the books of the Bible over solo sax

improvisation and rhythmic breaks from the brass section. The grand finale of the first *Sacred Concert* was "David Danced" for band, chorus, and solo tap dancer. This movement also first appeared as part of *My People* as an up-tempo version of "Come Sunday." There was to be no shying away from the association of jazz with dance, even in a church concert.

A large and diverse audience received the Grace Cathedral performance with enthusiasm. Pastor Gensel arranged for performances in New York soon thereafter at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. One of these two New York performances was recorded and later made available on the now out-of-print Ellington Centennial collection.¹⁷ At least twenty-five additional performances of this first *Sacred Concert* were given at venues as diverse as Coventry Cathedral in London, Bright Hope Baptist Church in Philadelphia, Albion College in Michigan, Temple Emmanuel in Beverly Hills, CA, and Constitution Hall in Washington, DC.¹⁸

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The Second Sacred Concert

The premature death from cancer of his musical disciple and alter ego Billy Strayhorn in May of 1967 had a major emotional impact on Ellington. When one of his clergy acquaintances, Canon Harold Weicker of the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York, suggested the idea of a second *Sacred Concert*, Ellington was soon channeling his grief and creative energy into writing a completely new suite of integrated pieces.¹⁹

For the longest movement of the work, "Freedom," Ellington chose to feature Strayhorn's personal vision of the "four major moral freedoms," an alternative to the traditional "four freedoms" of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.²⁰ This gesture of remembrance and respect for his friend was also an indication of the lack of creative inhibition Ellington felt in choosing words that challenged emblematic texts, whether they be sacred or secular. Making the subject of freedom a central part of a sacred program also reflected Ellington's belief in the congruence of basic sacred and secular values.

The second concert also includes instrumental numbers that reveal Ellington pushing the boundaries of his own harmonic language and musical style, such as the opening "Supreme Being," for which we have only a few of the in-

dividual charts in the Smithsonian collection and the recording itself.²¹ Where Ellington's vocal numbers with their colloquial texts give us unusually open and direct access to the composer's beliefs, these somewhat edgy and freely imagined instrumental movements suggest some of the complexity of his faith that lay just beneath the surface of his smooth conviviality.

The premiere of the *Second Sacred Concert* at St. John the Divine in January, 1968, was attended by a capacity audience of 7,000 people, with many more turned away at the door. Well over fifty performances were given over the next five years in churches, colleges, and concert halls all over the United States, and in France, Spain, and Sweden.²² A studio recording made in New York shortly after the premiere sold well and was recently re-released on the Prestige label.²³ Most observers have found the *Second Sacred Concert* to be the most fully realized of the three. Ellington declared it to be "the most important thing I have ever done."²⁴

Ellington's New Approach To Solo Vocals in the Second Sacred Concert

Ellington took a different approach to vocal solo writing in the *Second Sacred*

Concert. As was often the case before, Ellington was probably inspired directly by a particular musician, a Swedish singer he had encountered in Paris a few years before named Alice Babs.²⁵ She was a classically trained choral singer and coloratura soprano who also had a natural affinity for jazz phrasing. She allowed him to conjure up sinuous melodic lines with huge skips and chromatic intervals that required both the range and control of an opera singer and the flexibility and finesse of a jazz singer. In slow numbers such as "Heaven," "Almighty God," and "T.G.T.T." there is relatively little room for improvisation, because Ellington has written out a melody that looks like the transcription of an improvisation, which is how he often worked with instrumental solos as well (Figures 1 – 3).²⁶

Her understudy for these solos, which fall well outside the comfort zone for most classical and jazz singers, was a young soprano from Philadelphia, DeVonne Gardner. The recent high school graduate was first brought to Ellington's attention at a picnic given for members of the Singing City Youth Choir by June Read, an arts patron from New Jersey who was also a close friend of Ellington.²⁷ Shortly after this picnic, Ellington called Read saying he was "looking for a young, clear-voiced, soprano" and a "strong, young, gutsy basso" to sing in his *Sacred Concerts*. Read arranged for

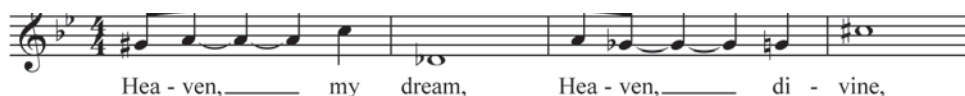


Figure 1. Duke Ellington, *The Second Sacred Concert (Praise God and Dance)*, "Heaven," mm. 1–4. Opening Vocal Line

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Dmin Gmin6 D7 G9
 Al-migh - ty God has those an - gels a - way up there a - bove_

4 Bb7 Ebmaj7 D7 G7 Gmin6 A7
 _ up there a - weav - ing spark - ling fab - rics just for you and me_ to love_

Figure 2. Duke Ellington, *The Second Sacred Concert (Praise God and Dance)*, “Almighty God Has Those Angels,” mm. 1–9. Opening Vocal Line

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Gardner and fellow Singing City youth Tony Watkins to audition for Ellington in New York.²⁸ Assigning them back-up vocals at first, Ellington soon had Gardner take over for Babs in most performances of the second Sacred Concert when Babs returned to Europe. Tony Watkins became the main baritone soloist in the concerts, featured in numbers such as “Don’t get down on your knees and pray.” A third member of the Singing City Youth Choir, Roscoe Gill, took on the role of preparing the choirs, helping with choral arranging, and updating

frequent changes in the charts. Gill and Watkins are no longer alive, but Gardner is still an active performer and teacher in Philadelphia and a rich repository of memories and hand-written revisions from the Sacred Concert tours.²⁹

The Third Sacred Concert

The remarkable success of the second *Sacred Concert* with a racially diverse and religiously ecumenical audience led to the commission of the third

Sacred Concert for the 25th anniversary celebrations of the United Nations set to take place in London in 1973. By the time of the commission in 1972, Ellington was already in the advanced stages of cancer, but was determined to accept and complete the commission. Given the condition of his health and his awareness of the reverberant acoustics of Westminster Abbey, most of the music this time is unusually slow, and richly meditative.

The crowning finale of this program was a set of six pieces alternating be-

G Emin C9(11+) A min7 F7 D7 G(b5)
 Ah_

Figure 3. Duke Ellington, *The Second Sacred Concert (Praise God and Dance)*, “Too Good To Title (T.G.T.T.),” mm. 1–4. Opening Vocal Line

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tween unaccompanied choir and solo vocal and instrumental writing, "Every Man Prays In His Own Language" was as true an epitaph as there could be for the composer's beliefs and his vision for the *Sacred Concerts*. In between two choral statements of the title phrase, there are five different versions of the "Lord's Prayer": (1–2) two instrumental settings, (3) one for the choir alone, (4) one for Alice Babs sung unaccompanied in Swedish, and (5) one freely set for solo recorder. Roscoe Gill set a final "Wordless Prayer" for choir and solo.

Close associates of Ellington relate that one of the stories he treasured as a source of inspiration for "Every man prays," and for the *Sacred Concerts* in general, was the classic French fable of the "Juggler of Notre Dame." In the story, a ne'r-do-well itinerant juggler is caught in the middle of the night juggling before the statue of the Virgin Mary on Christmas Eve, long after everyone else has left their fancy gifts. His explanation

to the priest is simply, "Juggling is my only gift, and I offer it to God."³⁰

Finished just days before the premier and under-rehearsed, the third *Concert* was not as well received by the critics and was not appreciated as broadly by the American public as the more exuberant earlier works. Some critics have suggested that the music for the third concert was less than fully realized by Ellington because of his health, while others ascribe the spare textures and slower tempi to the clarity of his musical and spiritual vision at the end of his life.³¹ Following the premier, he lived to do one more performance, on December 23, 1973, at St. Augustine Presbyterian Church in Harlem, a few short months before his death. The Westminster Abbey performance was recorded, but not released until the *Duke Ellington Centennial Edition – The Complete RCA Victor recordings (1927–1973)* boxed set produced by BMG Classics in 1999 (now out of print).

Contradictions in Ellington's Persona and Musical Style

Some of the contradictions in Ellington's public persona and musical style bear directly on understanding his verbal and musical language in the *Sacred Concerts*. He was proudly and self-consciously the entertainer who always closed his performances by telling his audiences "I love you madly." And yet film interviews later in his life also reveal a restless musician, who reluctantly kept performing the same popular hits over and over at the peak of his career in order to pay the bills, while he was using every spare minute to write and record his more ambitious extended suites (including the *Sacred Concerts*) on the side.³²

Ellington's combination of personal charm and smooth, up-town sophistication (with its accompanying "hipster" language) had broad appeal to both black and white audiences. He extended his personal charm to individuals as well, whether friends or strangers. He seems to have had an unusual openness to a variety of people, perhaps especially those with a faith perspective to share, even if it was much more doctrinaire than his more open views. In *Music is my Mistress*, Ellington relates a story of how a woman who was a Jehovah's Witness missionary approached him backstage to present her ideas. Rather than turning her away or avoiding future proselytization, he welcomed future conversations that continued on after she married one of his band members. "All of what she had to say was stimulating, and I still somewhat expect the time of Armageddon to come to pass."³³

And yet for all his personal sophistication, Ellington's music also had a distinctive edginess to it, full of dissonant and complex harmonies, bold orchestrations, and hard-driving rhythmic riffs and trademark "jungle growls" in the brass. These bright, hard edges immediately set

apart the sound of his band from other bands of the era, both black and white. Equally distinctive was the rich coating of sensuality in his ballads, especially those modeled on the unique sounds of hand-picked soloists like saxophonist Johnny Hodges (the original soloist for "Come Sunday").

Ellington's Personal Approach to Lyrics

Ellington summed up his approach to language in this way:

Communication itself is what baffles the multitude. It is both so difficult and so simple. Of all man's fears, I think men are most afraid of being what they are—in direct communication with the world at large. They fear reprisals, the most personal of which is that they "won't be understood." How can anyone expect to be understood unless he presents his thoughts with complete honesty?... Yet, every time God's children have thrown away their fear in pursuit of honesty—trying to communicate themselves, understood or not—miracles have happened.³⁴

As mentioned above, for the opening movement of the first *Sacred Concert*, he chose to set the first six syllables of the Bible, "In the beginning, God," matching these syllables with an angular, six-note motive that then becomes the formal basis for the piece (Figure 4).

Rather than completing the original line from the book of Genesis with the words "created the heavens and the earth," the soloist begins a litany of what wasn't there before God created the earth: "no mountains, no valleys, no main street, no back alleys ... no night, no day, no bills to pay ... no symphony, no jive, no Gemini five [astronauts]..." Right away we find a comfortable mixing of the majesty of God with the ordinariness and even the mere playfulness of daily life. Jazz critic Dan Morgenstern said of the original Ellington lyrics in the *Sacred Concerts*, "some of his metaphors may appear frivolous, but Ellington's seeming frivolity often is a cloak for high seriousness—the leavening of humor."³⁵ For the next section of "lyrics" in this opening movement, the chorus launches into a riveting recitation of the names of all the books of the Hebrew Bible over rhythmic breaks from the brass section and a free ranging solo improvisation from the sax.

The Simplicity of Ellington's Solo Lyrics

Some of the lyrics Ellington wrote for Alice Babs are short and epigrammatic, not unlike the texts of the traditional Spirituals, but with even less specificity. "Heaven, supreme, Heaven combines ev'ry sweet and pretty thing Life would love to bring; Heavenly Heaven to be is just the ultimate degree to be." This brevity and the taking of simple pleasure in the repetition of key words like "love" and "heaven" allows the pure expressivity of the vocal line to fill out the meaning. The solo number "T.G.T.T." ("Too Good to Title") dispenses with words altogether, and treats the voice purely as a solo instrument.

Lyrics like these and, from the third *Sacred Concert*, "My love, the love of my life, It's love of love that brings me love, the love of Heaven above" can be perceived at first glance as shallow and aimless. But more often than not, the simplicity of the words is a foil for the richness of the music. In their very "simplicity" the words come across not only as casual, but evocative, removing the wall of formality while leaving the window of mystery in place. In one of the last numbers he wrote, for his third and final *Sacred Concert*, Ellington



Figure 4. Duke Ellington, *The First Sacred Concert (In The Beginning God)*, "In The Beginning God," mm. 1–2. Opening Vocal Line

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reminds us again of the importance to him of the association of love with the pure being of God when the soloist asks,

"Is God a three letter word for love? Is love a four letter word for God?"

Themes of Justice and Forgiveness

The basic human need for justice and forgiveness are central themes throughout the concerts. In the second *Sacred Concert*, "Don't get down on your knees to pray until you have forgiven everyone" is typical of Ellington's hard-swinging "concert-to-style" numbers that show the band playing off the virtuosity of a particular soloist, in this case the aforementioned Tony Watkins.³⁶

Ellington breaks off this driving swing number mid-way for one of his more reflective, unaccompanied choral sections on a two-word chorus lyric: "Father, forgive" (Figure 6). Reiterations of these two words are interspersed with spoken lines confessing the sins of the day: "The hatred that divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class ... our indifference to the plight of the homeless and the refugee ... the lust which uses for ignoble ends, the bodies of men and women...."

Ellington's Approach to Choral Writing

Choirs with more than one singer on a part have historically been rare in jazz for two reasons: it is much more difficult for multiple singers on a part to sing complex jazz harmonies in tune, and it is equally daunting for such an ensemble to improvise together. Nevertheless, Ellington clearly intended medium to large choirs to be an important part of the orchestral pallet of his *Sacred Concerts*.

He was certainly familiar with church choirs, both gospel and traditional, from his childhood, but what he wrote did not fit comfortably into either idiom. When he began taking the first and second *Sacred Concerts* on the road and introducing different choirs to the music for the first time, Ellington also discovered that choirs generally need a little more rehearsing than one-on-

a-part professional singers. As a result, many adjustments were made along the way, based upon the particular strengths or weaknesses of the choirs involved.³⁷

Ellington's writing for large chorus in these works involves his very personal adaptations of several traditional vocal styles (see table for examples of each style):

- Back-up chorus harmonization;
- Unaccompanied, freely composed movements;
- Un-pitched, spoken unison rhythmic chanting; and
- Unison singing melody (men and

women in octaves), with written out or improvisatory figures agreed upon in rehearsal

There is only one selection in the three *Sacred Concerts* in which the chorus sings in parts rather than unison, with the big band, the understated but effervescent "Hallelujah" from the third concert. (One might call this Ellington's own "Hallelujah Chorus," notable here for its lightly swinging style in the midst of what is otherwise more reflective, autumnal music).

The traditional "back-up" chorus: a few singers supplying written out harmonization and rhythmic breaks, had long been a staple of jazz arranging, and can be found throughout the

Sacred Concerts. Unaccompanied jazz ensemble singing grew out of the close-harmony traditions of street-corner "doo-wop," gospel, and spirituals based on standard song forms.³⁸

DeVonne Gardner relates how Ellington had a special fascination for the sound of the unaccompanied choir and saw the Sacred Concerts as a welcome opportunity to exploit that sonority.³⁹ In these movements (Figures 5 <www.acda.org/publications/choral_journal>, 6, 7, and 8), the chromatic harmonies and voice leading would be relatively easy for instrumentalists but are quite difficult for singers, not only for gospel choirs not used to singing from notated scores, but also for "classical" choirs not used to Ellington's distinctive harmonic

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28

S
A
T
B

Fa - ther for - give, Fa - ther for - give, Fa - ther for - give,
Fa - ther for - give, Fa - ther for - give, Fa - ther for - give,

Figure 6. Duke Ellington, *The Second Sacred Concert (Praise God and Dance)*, “Father, Forgive,” mm. 28–33.

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language.

As challenging as these tonal elements are to master, these numbers also call for flexibility of phrasing and a sense of dramatic pacing. The rhythms in “Father, Forgive,” and the “Lord’s Prayer” are static, and melody takes a back seat to the role of Ellington’s illusive harmonies in coloring each word or giving a new color to the multiple repetitions of a word. Ellington’s particular sensitivity to harmonic color and its innate connection to emotion, mood, and meaning

may have been reflected in a sketch found on a blank sheet of manuscript paper mixed in with various charts in the Ellington Collection at the Smithsonian. Probably in the hand of one of his arrangers, two chords labeled as the “solitude chord” and “truth chord” are placed side by side (Figure 7a and 7b). These are the final chords from Ellington’s 1934 standard “Solitude” and “Tell me it’s the truth” from the first *Sacred Concert*.⁴⁰

One of the other unaccompanied numbers, the declamatory and highly

chromatic “Will you be there?” in the first Sacred Concert (Figure 8; adapted from his earlier *My People*) leads directly in to a more traditional dance number, “Aint’ but the one,” where soloist and choir engage in a swinging call-and-response jazz “stomp” (Figure 9). Here, Ellington exploits the parallel tertian harmonies of the gospel choir, familiar from days in his father’s Baptist church as a youth.

Ellington’s use of choral and solo recitation, both with the band (“In the Beginning, God”) and unaccompanied

Figure 7a. “Solitude and “Truth” chords from Ellington sketches

Figure 7b. “Solitude” and “Truth” Chords transcribed at concert pitch, assuming 4 staves: Alto, Tenor, and Baritone Saxophones, Trumpets and Trombones

S
A
T
B

Will you be there? Will your name be called? Will your name be called?

Will you be there? Will your name be called? Will your name be called?

Figure 8. Duke Ellington, *The Sacred Concert (In The Beginning God)*, “Will You Be There?,” mm. 1–5.
Choral opening

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1
Ten. Solo
S
A
T
B

Just one! Just one!

Ain't but the one, ain't but the one,

5
Ten. Solo
S
A
T
B

Ain't but the one good Lord a-bove, ain't but the one great God of love.

Ain't but the one good Lord a-bove, ain't but the one great

Figure 9. Duke Ellington, *The First Sacred Concert (In The Beginning God)*, “Ain’t But The One,” mm. 1–8.
Call and response between Tenor Soloist and Choir

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[Chorus part from published score]

[Tag added from DeVonne Gardner's notes]

Figure 10. Duke Ellington, *The Second Sacred Concert (Praise God and Dance)*, “Freedom – Word You Heard.” Closing Choral tag from performance notes

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(“Freedom Languages”), precedes the now common use of rhythmic speech in rap and art music by a few decades. The style is much different of course, but he was obviously attuned to the power of speech rhythm and the colors possible in highly flavored language inflection without melody.

Teaching the Sacred Concerts to Choirs

When I first approached teaching the movements with unison singing to my community choirs, I was afraid the singers would find the lack of harmony and independent parts less than stimulating to rehearse. But numbers such as those in the “Freedom” cycle and “Almighty God has those Angels” turned out to be the most fun of all. Unison singing is always a technical challenge for a choir, especially when classical choral singers who are used to singing only the exact rhythms as they are notated on the page have to “swing” (making even notes un-even) and add the jazz equivalent of “ornamentation” to what is in the written score.

DeVonne Gardner was helpful here in giving us some ideas from the “oral tradition” based on her notes and

memories from earlier performances.⁴¹ This especially affected the varied ways the melodic lines (and especially the closing “tags”) were sung, different both from what we could see in the notated versions or hear listening to the earliest recorded versions. Figure 10 is an example of one such tag from DeVonne Gardner's notes for the end of “Freedom—Word You Heard.”

Conductors considering performances of these works should not be intimidated by these challenges, however. Allowing for the creative flexibility to “work it out” with your particular singers and musicians will result in a much more “authentic” performance than singing only what is notated on the page, or trying to imitate exactly what can be heard on the original recording. Exacting as he was, “working it out” on the go is what Ellington and his musicians did as their

modus operandi. The most unfortunate choice, for both performers and listeners, would be to avoid performing this great music altogether.

Table 1 is an annotated list of the numbers in the three *Sacred Concerts*, along with indications of whether or not they are included in the G. Schirmer rental collection *The Best of the Sacred Concerts*. The chart also references how choral parts can be extracted from the Hansen House piano/vocal score, *Sacred Concerts, Complete—Duke Ellington Inspirational Music*. While each of the three *Sacred Concerts* has a formal coherence when performed separately,

conductors should not hesitate to mix and match numbers from different concerts depending on the materials and performers at their disposal, such as Ellington often did on tour.⁴²

Ellington's Vision: Our Opportunity

Duke Ellington's *Sacred Concerts* provide a perfect illustration of how music finds its fullest realization in live performance. Thousands of people attended concerts in the late 1960s and early 1970s which were more than just performances; they were events.

The special reliance of this music on live performance can be seen in the way it has continued to be widely performed in spite of having a much more tenuous connection to original materials than most other concert repertoire. Unusually diverse audiences heard a remarkably diverse group of performers speaking, singing, and playing in a musical and poetic language that mixed sacred and secular, playfulness and solemnity, sensuality and grandeur, classical and jazz. These combinations were unfamiliar in their interrelationship, but instantly recognizable in their humanity.

It certainly takes a little more work to

Table 1

Duke Ellington's *Sacred Concerts*. Annotated list of Movements (Timings based on Ellington Recordings)

Movement Title	Duration	Schirmer Collection	Comments on scoring/transcription
Sacred Concert No. 1			
In the Beginning God	20'	yes	full band, baritone solo, chorus recitation of books of the Bible—Old and New Testaments
Tell me it's the Truth	3'	yes	full band, alto solo
Come Sunday	4'	yes	clarinets, trombones, alto vocal solo (there is also a high voice version, not in Hansen or Schirmer, with choral intro and back-up)
The Lord's Prayer	3'	yes	full band, alto vocal solo
Come Sunday	6'	no	instrumental version
Will you be there?	3'	yes	a cappella choir, solo recitation
Ain't but the one	2'	yes	full band, tenor vocal solo, choir
New world a-comin'	9'	no	solo piano improvisation based on chart found in Hansen
David Danced	7'	yes	full band, choir, solo tap dancer

Table 1 continued

Movement Title	Duration	Schirmer Collection	Comments on scoring/transcription
Sacred Concert No. 2			
Praise God	3'	yes	full band only, prelude, extended tenor sax solo
Supreme Being	12'	no	full band only, fantasia, with extended choral recitation "Sonnet of the Apple" in the middle and final sections.
Heaven	5'	yes	full band, soprano solo vs.1, alto sax vs.2, verse 3 soprano solo with Latin swing
Something 'bout believing	8'	yes	unison choir, singing and recitation, with full band
Almighty God	7'	yes	stanza 1: solo soprano with band stanza 2: clarinet solo with soprano descant improvised stanza 3: unison choir with soprano descant improvised; repeat last 5 bars as tag last time through.
The Shepherd (Who Watches over the Night Flock)	8'	yes	full band only; extended solos on trumpet with plunger mute; homage to Pastor John Gensel
It's Freedom (recorded sequence given here is different from published or numbered sequence)	13'	yes	multi-section movement: Freedom No. 7: full band, chorus unison with solo improv Freedom No. 4: chorus a cappella w/solo improv. descant Freedom (Word You Heard): four times through: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) instrumental 2) chorus as written 3) band, clarinet solo, soprano vocal improv 4) chorus with some ornamentation; solo improv repeat last 4 bars as tag (see reference in article) <i>Freedom No. 6:</i> chorus a cappella <i>Freedom (Sweet fat and that):</i> melody unison women, counterpoint unison men (in Schirmer, but not in Hansen); repeat three times, last time ppp with only brushes accomp. <i>Freedom (languages):</i> choral recitation, one singer per translated word for "freedom"; solo recitation at end <i>Freedom No. 1:</i> chorus a cappella under solo recitation of Strayhorn's "four moral freedoms" <i>Freedom No. 7 Reprise:</i> full band, chorus unison with 7 bar tag (published version in Hansen and Schirmer is different from that on the recording)

Table 1 continued

Movement Title	Duration	Schirmer Collection	Comments on scoring/transcription
Meditation	3'	yes	piano solo with double bass; published version is close to a transcription of Ellington's recorded performance
The Biggest and Busiest intersection ("A Fire and Brimstone Sermonette")	4'	no	full band only; up-tempo, blues-based free form, featuring drums and walking bass; DE's depiction of door of Heaven as people converge from all directions to face judgment
T.G.T.T. ("Too Good To Title")	3'	no	wordless solo for soprano and keyboard (electronic on recording); Hansen version is close transcription.
Don't Get Down on Your Knees to Pray / Father Forgive	6'	no	full band, baritone solo, chorus backup to solo refrains (from sketches at Smithsonian, not in Hansen or Schirmer, or on the recording); a "short sheet" score and set of parts available in Smithsonian; interrupted by "Father Forgive" for chorus a cappella and solo recitation (choral parts can be extracted from Hansen version for solo voice and keyboard)
Praise God and Dance	11'	yes	full band, soprano solo, choral recitation, choral singing at end; dancers; extended reprise of first number, Praise God
Sacred Concert No. 3			
The Lord's Prayer	1'30	no	piano solo, segues into "My Love"; Hansen version is a close transcription
My Love	6'30	yes	full band (though not used all at once) with solos for soprano voice, tenor sax, and piano
Is God a Three-Letter Word For Love?	9'	no	full band; piano intro, soprano solo with chorus harmonization from middle of second time through (not in Hansen score); third time through is solo recitation over chorus a cappella, followed by final time with soloist, band
The Brotherhood	6'	no	full band and unison chorus (incl. recitation at end), tenor sax solo; (homage to UN, "our sponsor")

Table 1 continued

Movement Title	Duration	Schirmer Collection	Comments on scoring/transcription
Hallelujah	4'	no	full band and chorus in parts; chorus parts and repeat sequences can be extracted from the Hansen score with help of the recording
Every Man Prays in His Own Language	11'	no	<p>multi-section mvt. (most vocal and instrumental parts can be extracted from the Hansen piano score, which is a close transcription of the recording):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduction: band (lost) 2. Every man prays...; chorus a cappella 3. Lord's Prayer; instrumental 4. Lord's Prayer; chorus a cappella 5. Lord's Prayer; instrumental; choral "amen" (last two bars of Hansen transcription) 6. Lord's Prayer; solo soprano (not in Hansen; transcribed in Hill, p. 374) 7. Lord's Prayer; chorus a cappella (lost) 8. Lord's Prayer; solo recorder (not in Hansen; transcribed in Hill, p. 376) 9. Wordless Prayer; solo soprano and 6-part chorus, a cappella 10. solo recitation (DE) 11. Every man prays reprise; chorus a cappella with solo recitation; (first 3 1/2 bars words in tenor part only)
Ain't Nobody Nowhere Nothin' Without God	4'	no	full band and baritone vocal solo (transcription in Hansen, minus sax and brass parts)
The Majesty (Beauty) of God	7'	no	<p>full band, tenor sax solo, soprano vocal solo, chorus;</p> <p>there are four versions of this score, two in Hansen and two at the Smithsonian; none completely match the recording, though the choral parts can be extracted from the Hansen reduction; before the vocal solo that begins the Hansen scores, there are several solo variations on the theme/chords of this melody, for piano, then piano and tenor sax; a free piano improvisation, and a brass interlude; the ending, with band, soprano soloist, and chorus, is quite different on the recording than in the Hansen versions.</p>

bring this music to life again, not only in gathering the materials, but in preparing singers and audiences for music that doesn't fit neatly into familiar categories. But Ellington's music and his religious perspectives contain the combination of personal particularity and human universality that is the essence of great art. Ellington's vision offers us a fresh way to celebrate human spirituality as a potential source of unity and hope rather than of conflict and despair.

NOTES

¹ A number of bandleaders either directly or indirectly associated with the original performances have made their own transcriptions and arrangements for specific performances, which are by degrees more or less faithful to performances under Ellington's direction. Contrary to the situation in the United States, arrangements and re-arrangements of varying quality of various numbers from the *Sacred Concerts* have been produced by European publishers, where the music remains very popular.

² Wilbert Weldon Hill, *The Sacred Concerts of Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington*, dissertation, Catholic University of America (1995), available through UMI Dissertation Services, Ann Arbor, MI, 165–81. "Supreme Being" from the *Second Sacred Concert* is especially advanced, employing the octatonic scale, atonality, and other progressive classical and jazz compositional devices. The two instrumental sections are interrupted by an extended choral recitation of the "Sonnet of the Apple." Unfortunately, the only complete record we have of this composition is the recording; according to Hill even the Smithsonian Collection does not have a complete set of parts or score.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴ Duke Ellington, *Music is My Mistress*, (New York: Oxford, 1987), 171.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁶ Nat Hentoff, "The Final Chorus—The Shepherd of the Night Flock", in *Jazz*

Times, Vol. 29:1 (1999), 122.

⁷ Duke Ellington, *Music is My Mistress*, 273.

⁸ For an excellent outline of the performance history of the Sacred Concerts, see Hill, 42–61, from which the essential details in this brief description are drawn.

⁹ Mary Lou Williams' sacred jazz and especially her choral writing may have had some influence on Ellington, for whom she did some arranging during this period. See Gayle Murchison, "Mary Lou Williams's hymn *Black Christ of the Andes* (St. Martin de Parres): Vatican II, Civil Rights, and Jazz as Sacred Music" in *The Musical Quarterly* 86(4), Winter 2002, 591–629; also, her recordings *Mary Lou's Mass*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings (1974, reissued 2005), and *Mary Lou Williams presents Black Christ of the Andes*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings 1963, reissued 2004.

¹⁰ Hear, O Israel—A Prayer Ceremony in Jazz, setting of the Sabbath service by Jonathan Klein, with Herbie Hancock, Thad Jones, Ron Carter, Jermose Richardson, Grady Tate, Antonia Lavanne, and Phyllis Bryn-Julson, on the Jonny label, JBH025CD 1968, reissued 2008.

¹¹ See <www.davebrubeck.com> for a complete works list.

¹² See Catherine Clarke King, "Conversation with William ('Billy') Taylor, the JazzMobile man" in *The Black Perspective in Music*. Vol. 10, no. 2, pp.179–88. Fall 1982 for a discussion of *A Joyful Noise*.

¹³ See Karl Stark, "Jazz goes to church in Pitts' 'A Joyful Noise,'" *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 11/26/1996, p. D05.

¹⁴ Hannibal Lokumbe was previously known as Marvin Charles Peterson; see Barry Kernfeld. "Peterson, Hannibal." *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, 2nd ed. Ed. Barry Kernfeld. Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online. 23 Dec. 2008 <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/J352300>>. His *African Portraits* has been widely performed since its premiere in 1990 at Carnegie Hall and was recorded by the Chicago Symphony under Daniel Barenboim in 1996 (Teldec 98802). Recent cantatas include *A Shepherd Among Us* and *God, Mississippi, and A Man Called Evers*.

¹⁵ See <<http://www.rejoicensemble.org/>>.

¹⁶ Mark Sumner Harvey, "New World A' Comin': Religious Perspectives on the Legacy of Duke Ellington," in Jon Michael Spencer, ed., *Sacred Music of the Secular City—From Blues to Rap*, (Duke UP: 1992), 149.

¹⁷ A recent reissue of this recording was made by Status Records: *Duke Ellington Sacred Music—A Concert of Sacred Music from Grace Cathedral*, as well as a DVD of the concert issued by Eagle Rock Entertainment in 2005, *Love You Madly/A Concert of Sacred Music at Grace Cathedral*. There are relatively few recordings of the *Sacred Concerts* by groups after Ellington's death. Two currently available on private labels are *Sacred Music of Duke Ellington* (2006), Seattle Repertory Jazz Orchestra, Clarence Acox and Michael Brockman, Artistic Directors, Oregon Repertory Singers, and soloists Dee Daniels, James Caddell and Nichol Eskridge <www.srjo.org/Recordings.htm>, and *Everyman Prays in His Own Language* (2005), DeVonne Gardner, soprano, the Eric Mintel Quartet, Bucks County Choral Society, Thomas Lloyd, conducting <www.buckschoral.org>.

¹⁸ Hill, 426–30.

¹⁹ Duke Ellington, *Music is My Mistress*, 266.

²⁰ Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" proclaimed in his state of the union speech in 1941 were freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, freedom from fear. According to Ellington's recitation during "Freedom No. 1," Strayhorn's "four major moral freedoms" were "freedom from hate unconditionally, freedom from self pity, freedom from fear of possibly doing something that might benefit someone else more than it would him, and freedom from the kind of pride that could make a man feel that he was better than his brothers."

²¹ Hill, 165.

²² Hill, 430–441.

²³ *Duke Ellington—Second Sacred Concert*.

²⁴ Ellington, *Music is My Mistress*, 269.

²⁵ *Music is My Mistress*, 287.

²⁶ Now in her eighties, Babs is still alive and living in Sweden.

²⁷ *Music is My Mistress* 288–290.

²⁸ This story was related to me in a

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conversation with Karen Read Lautzenheiser, daughter of June and Bud Read, on August 7, 2008.

²⁹ These remarks are as related to me over the course of several performances of the *Sacred Concerts* I conducted with DeVonne Gardner as soloist between 2005–07.

³⁰ I heard this story from Karen Read Lautzenheiser in a conversation on August 7, 2008. She was told that her father, Bud Read, first mentioned the fable to Ellington at a time when

Ellington was contemplating the *Sacred Concerts* as a way to “find a graceful transition to elder statesmanship” at the end of his career.

³¹ See Wilbert Weldon Hill, *The Sacred Concerts of Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington*, 60ff; “Gary Giddins on the *Sacred Concerts* (1975)” in Mark Tucker, ed., *The Duke Ellington Reader* (New York: OUP 1993), 375–78.

³² *On the Road with Duke Ellington* [DVD]/ produced by Drew Associates; producer, Mike Jackson, distributed by

New Video, 2002 (originally released in 1974), narrated by Don Morrow; a portrait of Duke Ellington compiled primarily in 1967–68 as he moved from performance to performance, in concert halls, in nightclubs, in churches; includes interviews and intimate candid glimpses of his life on the road as he composed and brought his music to the people.

³³ *Music is My Mistress*, 171–72.

³⁴ *Music is My Mistress*, 261.

³⁵ Dan Morgenstern, ed. Sheldon Meyer —*Living with Jazz*, Pantheon New York: 2004, 135.

³⁶ This number is not included in the G. Schirmer *The Best of the Sacred Concerts*, and only a skeleton vocal score is in the Hansen House collection. But a complete set of band charts and a working score, as well as choral back-ups for the solo chorus, are available in the Ellington Collection at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, <<http://americanhistory.si.edu/archives/d5301.htm>>.

³⁷ Conversation with DeVonne Gardner, 2005

³⁸ Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans—A History* (New York: Norton, 1997), 281-284.

³⁹ Conversation with DeVonne Gardner, 2005.

⁴⁰ From the Ellington Collection at the Library of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. My thanks to band leader Dave Berger for his insight into the context of this sketch—though I should mention too, that he thinks I’m reading too much into the coincidence of finding these two labeled chords together on the same page of manuscript (I remain swayed by my initial impression).

⁴¹ Conversation with DeVonne Gardner, 2005.

⁴² See the listings of performances in the index of Wilbert Hill’s dissertation on the *Sacred Concerts* op. cit., 426–41.



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