A NOTE ON ELLINGTON

By IRVING KOLODIN

The twenty years of Edward Kennedy Ellington which are embodied in this concert comprise one of the most remarkable careers in American music. Whether it concerns the plaintive "Mood Indigo" or the elegant "Sophisticated Lady" which have become a part of the mass culture of this country, or the more intricate works which have stirred what Ellington calls the "jive sages" to futile search for gaudy enough adjectives, it can scarcely be contested that his voice is an individual one, his touch utterly distinctive, his fertility and invention without parallel in the field in which he works.

Perhaps the very identity of Ellington with the day-to-day life of America over a period which embraces a boom, a depression and a second World War has led to an acceptance of him much too casual for his real importance. Whether Ellington is a greater composer than Delius, say, whom he greatly respects, this writer can't say definitively; but he will acknowledge that the very thought of Delius engenders a more imposing picture than that of a man who is a band-leader, who appears in vaudeville theatres and makes black label records.

As in the case of Poe, who received his first considered approbation in foreign lands, Ellington's worth has been proclaimed most insistently by such non-Americans as Percy Grainger; the English critic, conductor and composer Constant Lambert; the French *savant* of jazz Hugues Panassié. It would be grossly inaccurate to say that Ellington is without honor in his native land, but it is our foreign brethren who have been mostly completely convinced that he is a prophet.

Virtually all the music to be heard tonight is the product of Ellington, his disciple-arranger Billy Strayhorn, or a member of the band. But the creative process involved has been the subject of so much misunderstanding and confusion that some clarification is in order.

The notion that most of the fine Ellington works are inspirations of the moment, in a recording studio while the wax is spinning, can be dismissed as a romantic idealization of a practical necessity. That necessity involves the character of the music itself, and the fact that the individual soloists in the band are encouraged to express their particular strain of talent within the structure of an idea which Ellington has conceived. Thus it may be said that an idea which occurs to Ellington is developed according to his knowledge of what a certain soloist can do with it—without saying that the idea, per se, belongs to them.

On the other side, a certain group of pieces, such as "Rockin' in Rhythm" on this program, have emerged from ideas conceived by one or another members of the band. These men themselves, however, are frank to admit that the molding and shaping that goes on under Ellington's direction produces something which would be quite beyond the capacity of any single musician, working independently. The subjective result of all this is that the performances are intensely personal, in a way that formal music knows nothing about.

This concert tonight then, as well as exemplifying the amount of real feeling and artistry that can be conveyed within the range of Negro music, also portrays the kind of creative effort that would be in force were conditions adjusted for it. As much individual effort as is contained in a given piece, it is still the sum of the creative energy of nearly twenty men, working together for a common purpose.

DUKE ELLINGTON AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Twentieth Anniversary Concert

CARNEGIE HALL
New York

Saturday Evening, January 23, 1943
at 8:45 o'clock

Proceeds for Russian War Relief

PROGRAM

I.

Black and Tan Fantasy ..... *Ellington-Miley*
Rockin' in Rhythm ..... *Ellington-Carney*
Blue Serge ..... *Mercer Ellington*
Jumpin' Punkins ..... *Mercer Ellington*

II.

Portrait of Bert Williams ..... *Ellington*
Portrait of Bojangles
Portrait of Florence Mills

III.

Black, Brown and Beige ..... *Ellington*
(A Tone Parallel to the History of the Negro in America.)

—— *Intermission* ——

IV.

The Flaming Sword ..... *Ellington*
Dirge ..... *Billy Strayhorn*
Nocturne
Stomp

V.

Are You Stickin'? ..... *Ellington*
(Chauncey Haughton, clarinet)
Bakiff ..... *Tizol*
(Juan Tizol, valve trombone; Ray Nance, violin)
Jack the Bear ..... *Ellington*
(Alvin Raglin, string bass)
Blue Belles of Harlem ..... *Ellington*
(Duke Ellington, piano)
Cotton Tail ..... *Ellington*
(Ben Webster, tenor saxophone)
Day Dream ..... *Ellington-Strayhorn*
(Johnny Hodges, alto saxophone)
Rose of the Rio Grande ..... *Warren-Gorman-Leslie*
(Lawrence Brown, trombone)
Trumpet in Spades ..... *Ellington*
(Rex Stewart, cornet)

VI.

Don't Get Around Much Any More ..... *Ellington*
Goin' Up
Mood Indigo

(Duke Ellington and his orchestra are under the exclusive management of the William Morris Agency, Inc.)

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

By Irving Kolodin

Black and Tan Fantasy — Ellington-Miley

In its first form, "Black and Tan" dates to a period more than fifteen years removed in Ellington's output. I say in its "first" form, for it has since given rise to at least two descendants: "Prologue to Black and Tan Fantasy" and "New Black and Tan Fantasy." Moody and mournful, it has deep overtones of sadness which give it cause to be called "Basic" Ellington. After the opening piano and clarinet duet, the band contributes to a steady surge of feeling which culminates in an ironic quotation of a theme certainly appropriate to these surroundings. (N.B. It's by Chopin). The first form of the work was strongly influenced by the great trumpet player "Bubber" Miley who was then a member of the Ellington band, and given a part-credit for composition on the first recordings.

Rockin' in Rhythm — Ellington-Carney

One of the most celebrated of Ellington recordings was of a tune by himself called "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got that Swing." His use of the term antedated the current popularization of it by at least three or four years—and such a piece as this shows why. The "Rock" is unmistakable and so is the "Rhythm." The currently celebrated band-leader Harry James acknowledged to me that the idea for the tune "Peckin'" with which he achieved his first fame about 1936, came from this piece, though the association may be obscure in the arrangement played tonight. Harry Carney, the fine baritone sax player, had the original idea from which this piece evolved.

Blue Serge — Mercer Ellington

In a direct baronial line, the twenty-three year old son of "Duke" Ellington should perhaps have become known as "Earl" Ellington; but Mercer is his baptismal name. However, he can offer, in a line of succession, the talent manifested in this pair of pieces attributed to him. The first, with its rather deceptively non-committal title, pursues a languid course, in which a tenor saxophone solo is the prominent feature.

Jumpin' Punkins — Mercer Ellington

Though Ellington, Sr., is known essentially as a composer and band-leader, he is a pianist of distinctive style and individual inclinations. That much is indicated in the opening strain of this piece, which is in what our British friends call "tempo"—meaning a gentle bounce gait that engages the attention without exciting it. Bass and piano are conspicuous throughout, if the amount of discretion embodied in this playing can be called "conspicuous."

PORTRAITS

Bert Williams — Ellington

This group of pieces represents a new departure for the talent of Ellington—new, that is, as of the period when the first two were recorded, about two years ago. It seems fair to say that the great Negro actor and comedian never enjoyed such a background piece for his pantomime as Ellington has created in this whimsical, concise estimate of his unforgettable talent. One can almost visualize him shuffling onto the stage of the Palace to its opening strains, and easing into the marvellous pantomime of a poker game which was one of his most brilliant creations.

Bojangles — Ellington

"Bojangles" is, of course, the unaging Mayor of Harlem and points west, the nimble Bill Robinson of the mischievous feet. All that is needed to complete this picture is the tip-tilted derby of the buoyant Bill, his balance-wheel of a cane, the dry tap of his feet on a hardwood floor. But lacking those, one can fairly see him in this agile, sharpwitted piece with its one line of thought and positive good humor.

Florence Mills — Ellington

To complete this tryptich of "Portraits," Ellington has revived a piece originally titled "Black Beauty" as suitable to the character of the fine singer Florence Mills who died within the last few years. In its altered form the main feature is a trumpet solo which leads the band.

Black, Brown and Beige — Ellington

This newest work of Ellington, and the most ambitious of his career, has its inception in an unproduced opera which has been stirring in his mind since 1932. The title "Boola" is exemplary of the work as a whole, for "Boola" is the term Negroes use to symbolize the perpetual spirit of the race through time. Thus when a discussion of some important phase of American history is under way—Valley Forge, for example—one of the group is sure to say: "Yes, 'Boola' was there all right"—referring to some heroic Negro little known to the white man who made a valiant contribution to the Revolutionary cause.

In this "tone parallel to the history of the American Negro," three main periods of Negro evolution are projected against a background of the nation's history. "Black" depicts the period from 1620 to the Revolutionary War, when the Negro was brought from his homelands, and sold into slavery. Here he developed the "work" songs, to assuage his spirit while he toiled; and then the "spirituals" to foster his belief that there was a reward after death, if not in life. "Brown" covers the period from the Revolution to the first World War, and shows the emergence of the Negro heroes who rose to the needs of these critical phases of our national history. "Beige" brings us to the contemporary scene, and comments on the common misconception of the Negro which has left a confused impression of his true character and abilities. The climax reminds us that even though the Negro is "Black, Brown and Beige" he is also "Red, White and Blue"—asserting the same loyalty that characterized him in the days when he fought for those who enslaved him.

A musical synopsis of "Black, Brown and Beige" must take account of the following factors, as guides to the programatic ideas the work embodies:

Black:

Work songs first—different songs according to different kinds of work—driving spikes, piling cotton, simple housework. A baritone saxophone solo by Harry Carney is prominent in this section, and finally the "tired out" work song, on the trombone of "Tricky Sam" Nanton.

The spirituals arise out of what the composer describes as the "Church Window" mood—the Negroes looked in from outside, but the windows were pretty, anyway. Toby Hardwicke's saxophone sets this mood. The full spiritual theme comes from muted brass, restated by the valve trombone and developed by the alto sax of Johnny Hodges against an inspired background of guitar and bass. All the themes, work and spiritual, are combined in the final section.

Brown:

The purpose of marking the wars of the past here is to bring out the Negro heroes who have participated in each. The Revolutionary war is suggested, then followed by the introduction of the West Indian influence, an important one to the whole Negro character. Two trumpets and a trombone are utilized here. "Swanee River" and "Yankee Doodle" are cited to establish the period of the Civil War. Emancipation was not an unmixed blessing, for it left the older Negroes with freedom but no security. A duet of baritone and tenor saxes tells the story of the old people's attitude toward Emancipation. Trombone and trumpet (Nanton and Stewart) take up the younger folk's happier side. Out of the Spanish-American war period and the emergence of the Negro into urban life comes the Blues, expressed through the voice of Betty Roche. The Ellington text is sufficiently noteworthy to be reproduced here:

"The Blues . . .
The Blues ain't . . .
The Blues ain't nothing . . .
The Blues ain't nothing but a cold grey day
And all night long it stays that way."

"The Blues . . .
The Blues don't . . .
The Blues don't know . . .
The Blues don't know nobody as a friend
Ain't been nowhere where they're welcome back again."
(Saxes cry out, trombone wails, trumpets bark on the theme of "Low, ugly mean blues.")

"The Blues ain't sump'n that you sing in rhyme
The Blues ain't nothin' but a dark cloud markin' time
The Blues is a one-way ticket from your love to nowhere
The Blues ain't nothing' but a black crepe veil ready to wear"
The Blues ain't nothin' . . .
The Blues ain't . . .
The Blues . . . "

Beige:

This section brings the Negro from the World War down to the present. The Harlem of the '20s, hotcha, excitement, razz-matazz, is mirrored in tom-toms and screaming brass, according to the common misconception that every Negro can sing wonderfully or dance phenomenally. We come closer to this Negro metropolis, to the tinkle of a piano in a gin mill. But, as Ellington says, there are more churches in Harlem than gin-mills. As for the Negro of the bands and the stage, Ellington has the epigram: "All they hear really is a few people trying to make a living." A waltz shows the striving to sophistication, but underneath is the clamor of feeling which is yet undisciplined according to European standards. It is a panorama of life—a longer "Harlem Air Shaft," showing the struggles for expression, the yearning for education which can rarely be used, the true straight line of the Negro's character which is too often turned aside and deflected by his surroundings. Finally, the voice of Jimmy Britton proclaims the theme of "Black, Brown and Beige" but still "Red, White and Blue."

The Flaming Sword — Ellington

A stay at the Sherman House in Chicago provided the title for this work two or three years ago. It is a band piece, in a slightly Cuban rhythm, which exhibits the virtuosity of the orchestra as a whole.

Dirge — Nocturne — Stomp — Strayhorn

Billy Strayhorn is the one talent of the day who has reacted to the genius of Ellington with comparable fervor and versatility. He is now 27 years old. Ellington found him in Pittsburgh in 1938, and gradually has worked him into the Ellington organization as arranger, some-time composer and handy-man. His assimilation of Ellington's mannerisms and his expression of them in ideas of his own has progressed to the point where members of the band can't be sure themselves whether a certain new creation is the work of Ellington or Strayhorn.

Fame knows him as the creator of such successes as "Take the 'A' Train," which has now become the orchestra's theme in theatre appearances, and "Chelsea Bridge." The titles of these new pieces are sufficiently explanatory to be intelligible without further annotation.

CONCERTOS

As many of the most famous sections of certain Ellington compositions were dictated by the talents of a certain performer in the

band, so whole works have been built up around the personality of one virtuoso or another. These have come to be known among Ellingtonians as "*concertos,*" in the sense that a single instrumentalist dominates the whole tonal scheme.

Are You Stickin'? — Ellington

Originally conceived for the fluid clarinet of Barney Bigard, this piece is now played by Chauncey Haughton, a reed player of considerable distinction, who joined the Ellington ensemble last summer. It is in jump tempo, brightly maintained throughout.

Bakiff — Tizol

As well as being Ellington's choice as "my only extractor" (meaning that he can take a rough Ellington score and divine just what was meant to be written into each voice) Juan Tizol is a brilliant exponent of that odd instrument, the valve trombone. Here he is heard utilizing the flexibility permitted by the addition of valves to the slide trombone with great originality.

Jack the Bear — Ellington

This is built around the solo bass, played by Junior Raglin. The original recording by the late, greatly admired Jimmy Blanton, is extended by a solo for the violinist Ray Nance.

Blue Belles of Harlem — Ellington

As Ellington says, this piece features the "pianist in the band"—namely, Ellington himself. It was written in 1938 at the invitation of Paul Whiteman for a concert which that band-leader gave in this hall, and was part of a "Bells" suite distributed among various celebrated composers. It embodies a reflective mood, developed in an improvisatory spirit.

Cotton Tail — Ellington

Ben Webster's insistent saxophone is the motivating influence in this piece, which was written around it. It moves forcefully throughout, with the saxes battling brass and piano individually, and as a section.

Day Dream — Ellington-Strayhorn

The lovely sensitive quality which Johnny Hodges draws from his alto saxophone—a truly unique sound in modern dance music—is here exploited fully. The mood of reverie in which Hodges excels is set off by the background provided by the band.

Rose of the Rio Grande — Warren-Gorman-Leslie

One is almost inclined to put a star beside this title, for it is the one work on the program which is not the creation of Ellington or one of his direct co-workers. However, it has come to be associated with the trombone playing of Lawrence Brown, one of the Ellington inseparables. In this version he takes two choruses, supplanting the vocal once sung by Ivy Anderson.

Trumpet in Spades — Ellington

In his career as a brilliant brass-man with Ellington, Rex Stewart has developed a unique technic on his instrument which is exemplified in this piece. By depressing the valve of his trumpet halfway, Stewart produces a strangulated, expressive sound which is usually associated with mechanical mutes or a plunger. Many trumpeters have imitated, without real success, the effects that Stewart produces in such a piece as this.

FINAL GROUP

Don't Get Around Much Any More — Ellington

This work began its career as a Johnny Hodges specialty called "Never No Lament," under which title it still must be sought for in its recorded form. However its pure melodic quality and really distinctive construction led to a vocal version which resulted in the title noted above.

Goin' Up — Ellington

The forthcoming film "Cabin in the Sky," in which the Ellington band appeared, is the source of this piece, which embodies the virtuosity of the whole ensemble. It utilizes three tempos, beginning in a medium bounce, slowing down somewhat, and then picking up sharply at the conclusion. Piano, four trumpets, five saxes, the trombone of "Tricky Sam," Hodges, the ensemble, Lawrence Brown, Nance, Webster and Stewart all have a part in the succession of episodes.

Mood Indigo — Ellington

This fitting conclusion to the record of Ellingtonia included on this program includes what the composer calls the "one new effect in modern dance music." By this he means the utilization of the special sound contributed by the early microphones (in use when the work was first recorded) to the whole sound that was heard. This "tone," which could not otherwise be isolated, was figured into the voicing of the instruments, and played a part in the final effect. Barney Bigard contributed the phrase which may be described as the "verse" of the piece—the contrasting arpeggiated idea.