

# A Jazz Night Like No Other!

The Norwich Philharmonic Chorus joins forces with the Echoes of Ellington for a rare performance of Duke Ellington's Sacred Music. Jazz (and Ellingtonian) aficionado, Tony Cooper, reports

**E**dward Kennedy 'Duke' Ellington, born in Washington, DC, on 29th April 1899, moved to New York City during the mid-1920s and here gained a national profile through his orchestra's appearances at Harlem's famous Cotton Club.

Overall, Ellington wrote three Sacred Music concerts whom he's quoted as saying 'are the most important works I've ever done'. The first appeared in the mid-Sixties receiving its première at Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, 1965, the second followed three years later premièred at the Cathedral of St John the Divine, New York, 1968, while the third first saw the light of day at Westminster Abbey in 1973 featuring the John Alldis Choir.

The critic of *Ebony* magazine called the 1965 San Francisco performance 'nothing but historic while forming part of a larger movement in the mid-Sixties bringing jazz and religion together' while the *Allmusic* review of the recorded album by Richard S. Ginell gained five stars. He stated: 'The Sacred Music concert taps into Ellington's roots in showbiz and Afro-American culture as well as his evidently deep religious faith, throwing it all together in the spirit of universality and sealing everything with the stamps of his musical signatures. Ellington often commented that he was not attempting to compose a Latin-type Mass but a series of thoughtful and spiritual statements relating to his faith.'

Whether you're a jazz, choral or classical-music fan the Norwich Phil's forthcoming concert of the Sacred Music promises a night of nights. But it's not the first time that the Sacred Music has been heard in Norwich. In celebration of Ellington's centenary in 1999, the Norfolk & Norwich Festival, under the direction of Marcus Davey, mounted a marvellous performance in St Andrew's Hall, Norwich, featuring the Festival Chorus and the Echoes of Ellington under the direction of their founder and clarinettist extraordinaire, Pete Long, with David Dunnett, Norwich Cathedral organist, in charge of the choral forces. It was a performance and a night to chalk up. So memorable, so different, so rewarding in every sense of the word.

In fact, the musical forces for the Phil's forthcoming concert have more or less the same performance team, the only difference being, of course, that the choral forces fall this time solely to the well-drilled Norwich Philharmonic Chorus with Maestro Dunnett, once again, in charge of the choral forces sharing the stage with Pete Long heading up the Echoes of Ellington.

Working upfront is a smashing trio of soloists comprising

Louise Marshall (who has worked with the likes of Beverley Knight, Van Morrison and the late great soul singer, Solomon Burke), Mary Carewe (who sang on Peter Maxwell Davies' 'Resurrection' album and also joined Lance Ellington (son of British bandleader, Ray Ellington) as a soloist at the James Bond 50th Anniversary Gala Concert at the Royal Festival Hall in 2012 hosted by Honor Blackman) and Cleveland



Duke Ellington



Louise Marshall © Michael Butterworth



Mary Carewe © Mark McNulty



Cleveland Watkiss

Watkiss (born in Hackney to Jamaican parents and an outright winner of a host of awards ranging from the Best Vocalist in the London Jazz Awards in 2010 to the Ivor Novello Award for Innovation in 2021. The Revd Richard Lawry (formerly an actor working with the National Theatre and Old Vic companies and now rector of St Nicholas' church, Blakeney, in north Norfolk) acts as the Narrator while Bradley Wray is the tap-dancer in the high-octane movement 'David Danced before the Lord', an invigorating and wonderful passage of the whole work.

Without a shadow of doubt, Ellington's music contains a unique blend of contrasts and contradictions. At once visceral and elegant, intimate and shouting, traditional and progressive, the music is unique, exciting, earthy and refined. Ellington could be well described as the best equipped of all American composers to stand at the junction between the two worlds of classical music and jazz.

To jazz fans the world over Duke Ellington is often described as 'the master of the jazz genre'. But Ellington - who, incidentally, came by his nickname 'Duke' by his school pals because of his regal bearing - always distanced himself from using the word 'jazz' preferring his work to be simply referred to as 'music'. Interestingly, his autobiography (published by Quartet Books in 1976) is suitably entitled *Music is my mistress*.

However, the beginning of Ellington's career came quietly in 1914 when at the age of 15 he wrote a simple piano piece entitled 'Soda Fountain Rag'. Over the course of his long and illustrious career he wrote so many interesting and exhilarating numbers that he became widely known the world over. For instance, when he played Berlin, the hotel he stayed at on Nürnberger Straße was renamed after him.

One of Ellington's musical idiosyncrasies was to take a piece of classical music and adapt and arrange it to fit his band's inimitable musical style which, in many cases, gained him a new audience. Great success came his way by his stylish and witty interpretation of Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* and Greig's *Peer Gynt* suites.

A loyal and a relatively easy-going person, Ellington

enjoyed nearly a 30-year collaboration with his pianist / arranger, Billy Strayhorn, which kicked in at the end of the 1930s. With Strayhorn he composed multiple-extended compositions such as *The Nutcracker* as well as many short pieces.

For a few years at the beginning of Strayhorn's involvement, Ellington's orchestra was widely considered to have reached its peak. Incidentally, it was Strayhorn who penned one of Ellington's most famous numbers which, in turn, became the band's signature tune, 'Take the A Train'.

Some of the musicians who were members of Ellington's orchestra such as saxophonist Johnny Hodges were hailed among the best players in the jazz idiom. So skilful and charismatic, Ellington moulded his players into one of the most highly regarded orchestral units in the history of jazz. Some members stayed with him for several decades.

A master at writing miniatures for the three-minute 78-rpm recording format, Ellington wrote or collaborated on more than one thousand compositions. His extensive body of work is the largest recorded personal jazz legacy in the world and many of his pieces have become standards. He also recorded songs such as 'Caravan' written in 1936 by Puerto Rican trombonist. Juan Tizol (one of his sidemen) which brought a Spanish tinge to big band jazz.

However, in the early Fifties the Ellington band was losing a bit of its charm and magic but following the band's appearance at the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival - founded by George Wein in 1954 - the band's fortunes changed dramatically. The Newport gig paved the way for some lucrative work and, indeed, opened the door wide open to regular foreign tours including several to our shores.

A busy man, indeed, Ellington recorded for most American record companies of his era, performed in and scored several films and composed a handful of stage musicals. Although a pivotal figure in the history of jazz, Ellington himself embraced the phrase 'beyond category' considering it a liberating principle, referring to his music as part of the more general category of American music. He was known for his inventive use of the orchestra as well as for his eloquence and charisma.



Duke Ellington Orchestra



Echoes of Ellington

He impressed so many people from all walks of life ranging from American presidents to the man-in-the-street and I'm pleased to say that I managed to catch the Ellington band on three occasions. The first time in January 1963 at the Granada, Walthamstow (madly, in carefree mood, I travelled there as a pillion rider on an under-powered battered-old motor scooter) followed by the Granada, Sutton and, finally, the Royal Festival Hall where British tenor saxophonist, Tubby Hayes, took Paul Gonsalves' seat in the second half owing to Gonsalves falling unwell during the interval.

On an historical note, Tubby Hayes played one of his last gigs in Norwich in November 1972 just before his untimely death in June 1973, aged 38, at the Jacquard Club in Magdalen Street which I owned with my blues-singing brother, Albert Cooper.

So many bands harbour Ellington in their repertoire and the recently departed slide trombonist, Chris Barber, loved playing early Ellington with his big band but, I feel, that the Echoes of Ellington are Duke's true disciples in the UK. I first heard them at Ronnie Scott's Soho jazz haunt in Frith Street and was immediately taken by their artistry and performance style. Departing the club in the early hours it flashed through my mind what a brilliant night I just enjoyed in the company of Ellington, Echoes and Pete Long. A formidable trio of jazz strength!

A virtuosic clarinettist and bandleader, Pete Long formed the Echoes of Ellington in 1994 not only to celebrate Ellington's music but also to deliver it 'live' to modern-day audiences. He has succeeded in his quest admirably and jazz enthusiasts the length and breadth of Great Britain (as well as continental Europe and the United States) have been amazed by the sheer likeness that the Echoes create capturing the true essence and sound of Ellington's original scores. And, I feel, that's down to Pete Long digitally studying Ellington's original scores held in the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

The Echoes of Ellington boasts a smashing line-up of virtuoso players who understand intimately the nuances put on the page by Ellington. Pete Long, of course, selects his musicians who are able to capture the individual sounds similar to the original Ellington sidemen such as trumpeters Cat Anderson and Cootie Williams and such illuminating reed players as Barney Bigard, Johnny Hodges and Harry Carney not forgetting star trombonist, Joe 'Tricky Sam' Nanton.

Ellington gathered many honours and accolades over his lifetime but to coincide with his centenary in 1999 (he died on 24th May 1974) he was awarded a posthumous Pulitzer Prize Special Award for music. Deservedly so!

The Norwich Phil's concert of Ellington's Sacred Music promises a night like no other! Book the date: Saturday, 19th March, St Andrew's Hall, Norwich, 7.30pm. Book tickets online via [www.ticketsource.co.uk/norwichphil](http://www.ticketsource.co.uk/norwichphil) or by calling TicketSource on 0333 666 3366 (£1.80 booking fee). [www.norwichphil.org.uk](http://www.norwichphil.org.uk)

If you want more - there is more. Boom! Boom! The Echoes of Ellington can be seen in concert at the fabulous Apex concert-hall in Bury St Edmunds, on Monday, 21st March, 7.30pm. The show comprises Pete Long's reworking of *The Planets* in the style of *The Nutcracker*, *Anatomy of a Murder* and the *Far East Suite* plus a few movements of a recently commissioned piece by the Deal Festival of Tchaikovsky's classic ballet score, *Swan Lake*, re-imagined, of course, in the style of Duke Ellington.

Take the A train or travel by car. There's a surface car park plus a good choice of restaurants sitting on the doorstep of the Apex, one of the finest and most comfortable venues to be found in East Anglia harbouring bright and clear acoustics. Box office: 01284 758000 or visit [www.theapex.co.uk](http://www.theapex.co.uk)