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 ***Ellington Uptown: Duke Ellington, James P. Johnson, and the Birth of Concert Jazz (review)***

Eric S. Strother

Notes

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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For some, the term "symphonic jazz" is a contradiction; the through-composed, "classical" artifact seems at odds with the improvisation and vitality of jazz. For others it summons up those instances where jazz infiltrates the concert stage in the form of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* or Igor Stravinsky's *Ebony Concerto*. Few imagine the converse—jazz mixed with elements of concert music. It is this body of music at the core of John Howland's *Ellington Uptown: Duke Ellington, James P. Johnson, and the Birth of Concert Jazz*.

The terms "concert jazz" and "symphonic jazz" refer to a body of music that blends the rhythmic and harmonic character of jazz with the structural character of concert music, along with its emphasis on orchestration. It is often traced to the work of Paul Whiteman, a white bandleader from Denver who wanted to "make a lady of jazz" by adding elements of the symphonic tradition, most notably an emphasis on precise and varied orchestrations. Like other musical fusions, the interactions between jazz and symphonic elements were as numerous and varied as the composers and songwriters who employed them. Howland uses Whiteman's style as a model against which to compare the styles of Ellington and Johnson. It is not held up as an ideal to which the other men either succeed or fail in measuring up, but rather as an established model that both men were aware of and as a point of comparison.

Duke Ellington's contributions to symphonic jazz are well documented. Ellington is frequently regarded as the first jazz *composer*, an acknowledgment that his approach to writing bore similarities to that of composers of concert music. One can see this in his interest in programmatic compositions (i.e., "Daybreak Express," "Harlem Airshaft") and the so-called "Ellington effect," which refers to his tendency to put orchestration and timbre at the forefront of his compositions by writing parts for individual performers rather than a generic set of instruments.

This desire and ability to put the right player on the right part sometimes necessitated changing the arrangement on the bandstand or in the recording studio.

Beginning with his *Creole Rhapsody* of 1931, Ellington exhibited a desire to write extended compositions that drew increasingly on symphonic formal designs. Howland considers the apex of this trend to be *Black, Brown, and Beige*, an extended suite premiered at his January 23, 1943 concert at Carnegie Hall. In fact, Howland dedicates more space to the discussion of this work than to that of any other in the book. Ellington aficionados will notice that his later, more mature suites, such as the *Far East Suite*, receive only passing mention. The reason for this is likely twofold. First, Howland is focusing mainly on compositions from the 1920s to the 1940s, and these later suites were written in the 1950s and 1960s. Second, he considers these suites to be "collections of disparate movements" (p. 194) rather than the congruent extended compositions that are the focus of this work.

Howland dedicates a chapter to Ellington's Carnegie Hall concerts as further evidence of his dedication to symphonic jazz. From 1943 to 1951, Ellington's orchestra performed at the prestigious venue eight times, each performance featuring an extended composition. Having discussed the first of these, *Black, Brown, and Beige*, in an earlier chapter, Howland focuses on *New World A-Comin'* from the December 11, 1943 concert and *Harlem* from the final concert on January 21, 1951. He dedicates some space to *Night Creature* and *Non-Violent Integration*—the two works that, along with *Harlem*, appeared on the 1964 recording *The Symphonic Ellington*. **[End Page 530]**

While Howland's coverage of Ellington is extensive, with the exception of some of these later extended works there is little new ground covered for this composer. This is not really Howland's fault. So much has already been written about Duke...

one spelling mistake and another small editing error).

In short, this volume is an absolute necessity for scholars of mid-twentieth-century American music, and a thoroughly enjoyable read.

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Ellington Uptown: Duke Ellington, James P. Johnson, and the Birth of Concert Jazz. By John Howland. (Jazz Perspectives.) Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009. [x, 340 p. ISBN 978-0-472116058 (hardcover), \$75; ISBN 9780472033164 (paperback), \$28.95.] Music examples, tables, facsimiles, photographs, index.

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