

Duke Ellington

Edward Kennedy ‘Duke’ Ellington (1899–1974) was from Washington D.C. and was introduced to classical piano by music-loving parents. The teenage Ellington modelled his playing on the stride pianists such as James P. Johnson.

He moved to New York, where his band, the Washingtonians, performed at the Kentucky Club, toured dance venues. He made his first recordings with this band and broadcast on local radio.



Duke Ellington (left) and his orchestra

From 1927 to 1931 Ellington's band was at the Cotton Club in Harlem. He came to national attention through weekly radio broadcasts from the club on NBC. His manager Irving Mills was a shrewd publicist. He ensured that Ellington had more exposure than other black bands. Mills promoted Ellington as a serious artist while also making sure that he was turning out commercially successful hit songs. Recordings of the band's music were being distributed all over the world. In 1933 the band toured Europe, where Ellington's work as the leading composer of jazz was being compared with contemporary classical composers.

Following a 1939 tour of Europe, Ellington and Mills split. Ellington made a series of recordings as part of a new contract with RCA Victor. Fresh from its European success, the band was at a peak. It was a settled band: most of the players had been with Ellington a long time.

It was a balanced group – its 15 players divided into:

- Three trumpets
- Three trombones
- Four reeds
- A rhythm section – including Ellington on piano
- Singer Ivie Anderson
- New additions Ben Webster on saxophone and Jimmy Blanton on bass gave Ellington new sounds and techniques to work with.

As a composer he was very sensitive to each member's qualities as a player. He crafted solos and ensemble parts which exploited their individual tone or style of playing. He took up their ideas from rehearsal and integrated them into the music before finalising the written score. Ellington's sound was very personal to him and to his players. Arranger Billy Strayhorn, who joined Ellington at this time, called this method of working 'the Ellington effect'.

Jimmy Blanton's virtuosity and rich tone on bass had an immediate effect on the band. Unusually for the time he was given solos, rather than being restricted to timekeeping – in 'Concerto For Cootie' the bass is used with the horns, for example, to bring out the descending chromatic quavers in the introduction. His playing influenced the other bass players in jazz. Blanton died from tuberculosis in 1941, at the tragically young age of 23 years.

Duke Ellington's orchestra consisted of:

- Johnny Hodges and Otto Hardwick, alto sax
- Barney Bigard, clarinet
- Ben Webster, tenor sax
- Harry Carney, baritone sax
- Wallace Jones, Cootie Williams and Rex Stewart, trumpets
- Lawrence Brown, Joe Nanton and Juan Tizol, trombones
- Fred Guy, guitar
- Duke Ellington, piano
- Jimmy Blanton, bass.

SWING ERA COMPARISONS

Compare Ellington's recordings from the 1940s with examples of earlier Ellington, e.g., 'Creole Rhapsody' (1932) and 'East St Louis Toodle-Oo' (1926 version, performing as Duke Ellington And His Kentucky Club Orchestra).

AS PRESCRIBED WORK 2017

Duke Ellington: ‘Ko-Ko’ (1940)

0:00	Intro		The four-note repeated E \flat in the baritone sax is the main rhythmic figure of the whole piece.
0:12	Chorus 1	Valve trombone solo	Juan Tizol’s solo opens with the four-note rhythm on the pitches B \flat -C \flat -A \flat -G \flat , answered by 7th chords in the saxes. Syncopated octave B \flat tones in the piano towards the end of the chorus.
0:32	Chorus 2	Trombone solo	Joe ‘Tricky Sam’ Nanton has two choruses, using a ‘ya-ya’ effect. This technique was his own invention, and involved using a combination of a growling plunger mute and another mute fixed inside the trombone, to create a vocal-like sound. The four-note riff is in the saxes, answered by a brass ‘du-wah’ (alternating repeated notes quickly between closed and open plunger.) In Chorus 3 the solo starts with the restricted sound of a tight plunger, before returning to the ‘ya-ya’.
0:51	Chorus 3		
1:08	Chorus 4	Piano solo	The riff repeats every bar, so the answering ‘du-wah’ is shorter. The fourth note of the riff, D \flat , makes the 7th of the E \flat m7 chord).
1:26	Chorus 5	Full ensemble	The riff moves to unison trumpets, back to two-bar phrases, with sustained chords in saxes and trombones. The fourth note of the riff, F, is a more dissonant 9th of the chord, adding to the tension.
1:44	Chorus 6	Double bass and ensemble	A ‘chase chorus’ between double bass and the band, alternating two-bar phrases.
2:03	Chorus 7	Full ensemble	Final ‘shout chorus’. Melody in unison saxophones, with clarinet on the highest note of the sustained chord in brass.
2:22	Coda		Return to the music of the introduction.

The approach to harmony in 'Ko-Ko' is complex:

- The minor key (E \flat minor) is less common for a blues.
- There is a feel of the Aeolian mode in the regular use of C \flat and D \flat .
- Blue notes are used to create dissonance in chords (for example, the clash of D \flat and D \natural in the saxes in the first riff of Chorus 1).
- Ellington uses whole tone chords and scales in his piano solo.
- There is more use made of chord extensions in later choruses (for example, 9ths and 11ths in Chorus 7), creating a dissonant effect.

The dark, brooding sound is characteristic of Ellington's 'jungle' style, which he originally developed for the exotic African-style floor shows of the Cotton Club. Despite its origins as entertainment for white audiences, he took his African-American identity seriously. 'Ko-Ko' was intended as part of an opera called *Boola*, which he never completed.

AS PRESCRIBED WORK 2017

Duke Ellington: 'Concerto For Cootie' (1940)

0:00	Intro	8 bars	F major. Opening solo phrase answered by close harmonies in reeds over a descending chromatic bass. Reeds and bass begin in straight eights, then into swung quavers with crescendo to full band.
0:17	A	10 bars	Cootie Williams's trumpet solo, closed plunger mute over pixie mute. Answering trombone chords. Pizzicato walking bass in second half leads into an extended band passage (in saxes, one trombone on lowest note of chords).
0:41	A ¹	10 bars	Answering reeds on the repeat, with brass added in the last two bars.
1:07	B	8 bars	Trumpet growl, plunger half open. Walking bass, more of a swing feel.
1:25	A ²	8 bars	As opening A, with trombones reharmonised.
1:45	Link	4 bars	Loud descending chromatic figure on unison trombones, syncopated chords in band, modulating to a new key.
1:56	C	16 bars	D \flat major. Bright, open tone on solo. Three variations on the same phrase in middle and high registers (up to a top B \flat , concert A \flat).

2:34	Link	2 bars	Return modulation to F major over quavers in the bass.
2:38	A³	6 bars	F major. Return of A melody, with inverted second phrase. Reeds accompany.
2:53	Coda	10 bars	Ascending scale (beginning on the dominant C) brings in the final section in full band. Repeated high notes in trumpet answering. Reduced instrumentation to finish quietly.

Duke Ellington & His Orchestra: *Never No Lament: The Blanton-Webster Band*

‘Concerto For Cootie’ was later rearranged as a song, ‘Do Nothing ‘Til You Hear From Me’, first recorded by Woody Herman in 1943. This version has more usual eight-bar sections, more suitable for a vocal hit.

AS PRESCRIBED WORK 2017

Duke Ellington: ‘Harlem Air Shaft’ (1940)

0:00	Intro	12 bars	12 bars. Antiphonal use of sections: brass begin, saxophones lead the middle 4 bars, trombones at the end. Strong rhythm section: Sonny Greer plays drums with brushes, guitar, walking bass, Ellington adds piano fills.
0:15	Chorus 1	32 bars AABA	Melody in unison saxes, answered by muted trumpets in chords. In B chordal saxophones in call and response with trombone solo from Joe Nanton (growl technique, as in <i>Ko-Ko</i>).
0:55	Chorus 2	32 bars AABA	Rhythm section stops for four bars. Saxes in harmony, sliding up to high sustained notes, then more intricate riffs. Solo trumpet from Cootie Williams improvises.
1:35	Chorus 3	32 bars AABA	Trombones melody in harmony (trumpets added for the sustained chords in B), countermelody in saxes. Barney Bigard improvises clarinet solo. Jimmy Blanton on bass and Sonny Greer drive the music forward.
2:14	Chorus 4	32 bars AABA	Drops to piano, then crescendo to a loud conclusion. Clarinet solo continues quietly, then stops for the muted trumpet, returning again for the B section and the end. Overlapping short repeated motifs create excitement in final A section.

Duke Ellington & His Orchestra: *Never No Lament: The Blanton-Webster Band*

Ellington later described ‘Harlem Air Shaft’ – describing noises and smells sensed through a ventilation shaft – in terms of a programme. Opinion is divided about whether he made up the background story after the music was written. Some say that he often linked music with images and that the programme came before the music. For example:

- During the intro the different sections in different keys suggest the groups of people living their own lives.
- The high saxes in Chorus 2 and the drums re-entering represent the high aerial’s fall and crash.
- The quiet clarinet and muted trumpet at the beginning of Chorus 4 represent the ‘intimate gossip’.

THE HOT BACH

‘...So much goes on in a Harlem air shaft. You get the full essence of Harlem in an air shaft. You hear fights, you smell dinner, you hear people making love. You hear intimate gossip floating down. You hear the radio. An air shaft is one great big loudspeaker. You see your neighbor’s laundry. You hear the janitor’s dogs. The man upstairs’ aerial falls down and breaks your window. You smell coffee... I tried to put all that in “Harlem Air Shaft”.’

Duke Ellington, quoted in Richard O. Boyer’s column, ‘The Hot Bach’ for *The New Yorker* (1944).