

# Duke Ellington's Sacred Concerts

In the last decade of his life, Duke Ellington wrote three **Sacred Concerts**:

- 1965 - A Concert of Sacred Music
- 1968 - Second Sacred Concert
- 1973 - Third Sacred Concert

Ellington called these concerts “the most important thing I have ever done”. He said many times that he was not trying to compose a “Mass” (liturgy). The critic Gary Gidins has characterized these concerts as Ellington bringing the Cotton Club revue to the church.<sup>[1]</sup>

## 1 Concert of Sacred Music

As early as October 1962, the Reverend John S. Yaryan approached Ellington about performing at the new **Grace Cathedral** in San Francisco when it opened in 1965. The cathedral planned a “Festival of Grace”, with a variety of cultural works and speakers, to occur during the first year the cathedral was open, and Ellington’s concert was to be a part of it.<sup>[2]</sup> (The “festival” also included a performance by Vince Guaraldi.<sup>[3]</sup>)

The concert premiered on September 16, 1965, and was recorded by **KQED**, a local public television station.<sup>[2]</sup> The performance was released on CD as *A Concert of Sacred Music Live from Grace Cathedral* and on DVD as *Love You Madly/A Concert of Sacred Music at Grace Cathedral*. The official album on RCA, *A Concert of Sacred Music*, was recorded at two concerts at **Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church** in New York on December 26, 1965. Additional material from these concerts, not found on the original album, can be found on the 24-CD box set *The Duke Ellington Centennial Edition: The Complete RCA Victor Recordings (1927-1973)*. The concert mixed existing and new material, with “New World a’Commin” and “Come Sunday” from *Black Brown and Beige* and “Heritage (My Mother, My Father)” from the show *My People*. A new piece, the song “In the Beginning God”, was awarded a **Grammy Award** in 1967.<sup>[4]</sup> It was performed again at Grace Cathedral on its 25th and 50th anniversaries, in 1990 and 2015.<sup>[2]</sup>

### 1.1 Reception

The Allmusic review by Richard S. Ginell awarded the album five stars and stated “the concert taps into Ellington’s

roots in showbiz and African-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”.<sup>[5]</sup>

**Ebony** magazine called the piece “historic”, situating it as part of a larger movement in the mid-60s that brought together jazz and religion.<sup>[3]</sup>

### 1.2 Track listing

*All compositions by Duke Ellington*

1. “In the Beginning God” - 19:36
2. “Will You Be There?” - 1:23
3. “Ninety Nine Percent” - 2:23
4. “Ain’t But the One” - 3:31
5. “New World a’Coming” - 9:56
6. “In the Beginning, God II” - 4:31
7. “Heritage” - 3:42
8. “The Lord’s Prayer” - 3:16
9. “Come Sunday” - 5:30
10. “David Danced Before the Lord With All His Might” - 9:00
11. “The Lord’s Prayer II” - 4:56

The album was recorded at the **Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church** on December 26, 1965.

### 1.3 Personnel

- Duke Ellington – piano
- Cat Anderson, Mercer Ellington, Herb Jones, Cootie Williams - trumpet
- Lawrence Brown, Buster Cooper, Quentin Jackson - trombone
- Chuck Connors - bass trombone
- Russell Procope, Jimmy Hamilton - alto saxophone, clarinet

- Johnny Hodges - alto saxophone
- Paul Gonsalves - tenor saxophone
- Harry Carney - baritone saxophone
- John Lamb - bass
- Louie Bellson - drums
- Brock Peters, Queen Esther Marrow, Jimmy McPhail - vocals
- The Herman McCoy Choir - choir
- Bunny Briggs - tapdancing (track 10)

## 2 Second Sacred Concert

Ellington's *Second Sacred Concert* premiered at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York on January 19, 1968 but no recording of this actual performance has surfaced. The *Second Sacred Concert* was then recorded on January 22 and February 19, 1968 at Fine Studio in New York and originally issued as a double LP on Prestige Records and reissued on one CD, minus the tracks, "Don't Get Down On Your Knees To Pray Until You Have Forgiven Everyone" and "Father Forgive".<sup>[6]</sup> All the tracks can be found in the 24-CD box set *The Duke Ellington Centennial Edition: The Complete RCA Victor Recordings (1927-1973)*.

This concert is the first time Swedish singer Alice Babs recorded with the Ellington Orchestra. In the concert she sang "Heaven" and the wordless vocal, "T.G.T.T. (Too Good to Title)". Cootie Williams has a "growl" trumpet feature on "The Shepherd (Who Watches Over the Night Flock)". This piece is dedicated to Rev. John Garcia Gensel, Lutheran pastor to the jazz community. The climactic ending is "Praise God and Dance", which comes from Psalm 150.

At the invitation of the Harvard Episcopal Chaplaincy, Ellington gave the concert again at Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Boston on April 20, 1969.

### 2.1 Reception

The Allmusic review by Richard S. Ginell awarded the album 4 stars and stated "the material is fresh, not a patchwork of old and new like the first concert — and in an attempt to be as ecumenical as possible, Ellington reaches for novel techniques and sounds beyond his usual big band spectrum".<sup>[7]</sup>

### 2.2 Track listing

*All compositions by Duke Ellington*

1. "Praise God" - 3:09
2. "Supreme Being" - 11:45
3. "Heaven" - 4:55
4. "Something 'Bout Believing" - 8:12
5. "Almighty God" - 6:32
6. "The Shepherd (Who Watches over the Flock)" - 7:10
7. "It's Freedom" - 13:00
8. "Meditation" - 3:10
9. "The Biggest and Busiest Intersection" - 3:57
10. "T.G.T.T. (Too Good to Title)" - 2:25
11. "Don't Get Down On Your Knees To Pray Until You Have Forgiven Everyone" - 5:13 Omitted from CD reissue
12. "Father Forgive" - 2:49 Omitted from CD reissue
13. "Praise God And Dance" - 10:49

- Recorded at Fine Studio in New York on January 22 (tracks 3, 5, 7, 10 & 13) and February 19 (tracks 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11 & 12), 1968.

### 2.3 Personnel

- Duke Ellington – piano, narration
- Cat Anderson, Mercer Ellington, Money Johnson, Herb Jones, Cootie Williams - trumpet
- Lawrence Brown, Buster Cooper, Bennie Green - trombone
- Chuck Connors - bass trombone
- Russell Procope - alto saxophone, clarinet
- Johnny Hodges - alto saxophone
- Jimmy Hamilton - clarinet, tenor saxophone
- Paul Gonsalves - tenor saxophone
- Harry Carney - baritone saxophone
- Jeff Castleman - bass
- Sam Woodyard, Steve Little - drums
- Alice Babs, Devonne Gardner, Trish Turner, Roscoe Gill - vocals
- The AME Mother Zion Church Choir, Choirs Of St Hilda's and St. Hugh's School, Central Connecticut State College Singers, The Frank Parker Singers - choirs

### 3 Third Sacred Concert

The *Third Sacred Concert* was built around the skills of Alice Babs, Harry Carney, and Ellington himself on the piano. It was premiered at **Westminster Abbey** in **London, United Kingdom** on October 24, 1973 and released on LP in 1975 but has only been issued on CD as part of the 24 disc *The Duke Ellington Centennial Edition: The Complete RCA Victor Recordings (1927-1973)* collection.<sup>[8]</sup>

At this point in his life, Ellington knew he was dying. Author Janna Tull Steed has written that of all the concerts that Ellington is addressing God facing his mortality.<sup>[9]</sup> Alice Babs sings *Is God a Three Letter Word for Love?* and *My Love*. Tenor saxophonist Harold Ashby is featured on *The Brotherhood*, which is a tribute to **The United Nations**.

#### 3.1 Reception

The **Allmusic** review by Richard S. Ginell awarded the album 3 stars and stated “the weakest of the sacred concerts. It lacks the showbiz kick and exuberance of the first concert and even more eclectic impulses of the second, now burdened with a subdued solemnity and the sense that the ailing Ellington knew his time was drawing to a close (he would be dead exactly six months later)”.<sup>[10]</sup>

#### 3.2 Track listing

*All compositions by Duke Ellington*

1. *Introduction By Sir Colin Crowe* - 1:28
2. *Duke Ellington's Introduction* - 1:26
3. “The Lord’s Prayer: My Love” - 7:49
4. “Is God A Three-Letter Word For Love? (Part I)” - 4:27
5. “Is God A Three-Letter Word For Love? (Part II)” - 3:46
6. “The Brotherhood” - 5:46
7. “Hallelujah” - 3:32
8. “Every Man Prays In His Own Language” - 11:10
9. “Ain’t Nobody Nowhere Nothin’ Without God” - 4:20
10. “The Majesty Of God” - 7:27

- Recorded at Westminster Abbey, London on October 24, 1973.

### 3.3 Personnel

- Duke Ellington – piano, narration
- Johnny Coles, Mercer Ellington, Barrie Lee Hall, Money Johnson - trumpet
- Art Baron, Vince Prudente - trombone
- Chuck Connors - bass trombone
- Harold Minerve - alto saxophone, flute
- Russell Procope - alto saxophone
- Harold Ashby - clarinet, tenor saxophone
- Percy Marion - tenor saxophone
- Harry Carney - baritone saxophone, clarinet, bass clarinet
- Joe Benjamin - bass
- Quentin White - drums
- Alice Babs, Tony Watkins - vocals
- John Alldis Choir - choir

### 4 Notes

[1] Giddins, Gary *Visions of Jazz: The First Century* (ISBN 0195076753) p. 491.

[2] “From the Club to the Cathedral: Revisiting Duke Ellington’s Controversial ‘Sacred Concert’”. KQED. 2015-09-14. Retrieved 2015-09-18.

[3] Johnson, David Brent (2011-05-19). “Sacred Blue: Jazz Goes To Church In the 1960s”. Night Lights Classic Jazz - Indiana Public Media. Retrieved 2015-09-18.

[4] “Duke Ellington”. *The GRAMMYs*. Retrieved 2015-09-18.

[5] Ginell, R. S. **Allmusic** Review accessed June 8, 2010

[6] **A Duke Ellington Panorama** accessed May 17, 2010

[7] Ginell, R. S. **Allmusic** Review accessed June 8, 2010

[8] <http://earshot.org/Events/sacred.html>

[9] Steed page 148

[10] Ginell, R. S. **Allmusic** Review accessed June 8, 2010

### 5 References

- Steed, Janna Tull *Duke Ellington: A Spiritual Biography (Lives & Legacies)* ISBN 978-0-8245-2351-0

## 6 Text and image sources, contributors, and licenses

### 6.1 Text

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