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# Improvisation as Composition: Fixity of Form and Collaborative Composition in Duke Ellington's *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*

Katherine Williams

Pianist, composer and bandleader Edward Kennedy (“Duke”) Ellington (1899–1974) emerged on the New York City jazz scene in 1923. Within just a few years, the Ellington band’s original repertoire and performances were attracting much critical attention. A common theme of the discourse surrounding Ellington from the 1920s was the comparison of his repertoire with European classical music. These judgements were always imposed from outside, for although Ellington expressed an admiration for classical composers, he frequently asserted his desire not to associate his own works with the classical tradition. At one point in his career, he even stated that “I am not writing classical music, and the musical devices that have been handed down by serious composers have little bearing on modern swing.”<sup>1</sup> Ellington composed prolifically in the jazz idiom for the entirety of his performing career (which ended with his death in 1974), and critical and scholarly evaluations of his works using classical music criteria were further fuelled by a series of large-scale compositions that he produced from 1943.<sup>2</sup> Critical assertions of classicism in Ellington’s repertoire have almost universally focussed on the subtleties and sophistication of his composition—with “composition” referring to the predetermined and usually notated sections of the work.

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<sup>1</sup>Duke Ellington, “Certainly It’s Music!” in *The Duke Ellington Reader*, ed. Mark Tucker (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 246–248. Ellington qualified his statement by explaining: “That I owe a debt to the classical composers is not to be denied but it is the same debt that many composers, for generations, have owed to Brahms, Beethoven, Debussy and others of their calibre. They have furnished us with wholesome musical patterns in our minds and have given us a definite basis from which to judge all music, regardless of its origin.” *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>2</sup>Although earlier works such as “Rockin’ in Rhythm” (1931)—in rondo form—borrowed from classical formal techniques, only the 1940s larger-scale works were performed in classical venues. Examples of these works include *Black, Brown and Beige* (1943), *The Perfume Suite* (1944), *Deep South Suite* (1946), *Liberian Suite* (1947) and *The Tattooed Bride* (1948)—all of which were composed for performances at the traditionally classical venue Carnegie Hall.

Improvisation, considered by many to be the essence of jazz, has not contributed to classical value judgements of Ellington's output.<sup>3</sup> A further source of the alignment of Ellington and his musical output with the classical-music tradition was the consistent identification of Ellington as the sole musical *auteur* of the band's repertoire by the critical establishment—such a stance simultaneously situated him in the classical “great man” history of music and ignored any musical contributions of his band men.<sup>4</sup>

In this article, I seek to redress this imbalance in the critical discourse surrounding classical values in Ellington's repertoire. I approach this topic from a contrasting perspective, using an example of his output from the swing period, *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* (first performed 1937) as a case study, and focussing on the changing nature of improvisation in three recorded performances of this piece over the following two decades. Three improvisatory components of the piece—a baritone saxophone solo, Ellington's piano playing, and the function of the interlude—are analyzed in detail to illustrate that, as well as containing compositional features that critics could align with art music composers, the improvised content of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* exhibited classical performance ideals. The impact of extra-musical influences on the spontaneity of improvisation—such as the limitations of recording, the consequences of prolonged touring, and the expectations of audiences and record collectors—are also considered. My analysis focuses more on the audible aspects of recorded performances than the notation-dependent analysis favored by classical music scholars. Where notated examples are given, they are transcriptions from these recordings, or extracts from Ellington's original manuscript.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, I describe and explain how comparisons of Ellington's compositions with classical music emerged, and how *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* may be seen to fulfill criteria of both classical evaluation and swing repertoire. I then explain how the differing uses of improvisation in three recordings of the work can further illuminate these descriptions. Rather than propose a clear-cut distinction between notated, composed classical music and improvised, so-called spontaneous, “jazz,” I suggest that the two categories are more similar than is commonly acknowledged. This study is not

<sup>3</sup>Mervyn Cooke explains the history of, and reasons for, examining jazz music through a classical critical lens. He argues that, rather than being simply a correct or an incorrect method of evaluation, the overlap and symbiosis of the two styles deserves investigation. He also suggests that much of the recent rejection of classical values in jazz criticism may be attributed to the use of outdated nineteenth-century criteria: “Part of the inappropriateness of applying a classical analytical approach to jazz arises from the fact that romanticised notions of musical structure are unhelpful when considering much twentieth-century music (in any idiom). There is no point in relating Ellington's work to nineteenth-century ideas of thematic unity, when he owed a much more significant debt to twentieth-century composers whose work was mostly rooted in entirely different organisational principles.” Cooke, “Jazz among the Classics, and the Case of Duke Ellington,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*, edited by Mervyn Cooke and David Horn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 160.

<sup>4</sup>Tony Whyton further explains this critical tradition in his recent study *Jazz Icons: Heroes, Myths and the Jazz Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 127–152.

<sup>5</sup>These transcriptions are drawn from three clearly labelled sources: Ellington's original manuscript to *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* (now held in the Smithsonian Institution), a transcription of the entire 1937 recording by London-based session saxophonist and musical director of Ellington repertoire bands Echoes of Ellington and Deluxe 9:20 Peter Long, and my own transcriptions of solo lines.

intended as yet another reiteration of Ellington's compositional genius, but seeks instead to underscore **the collaborative nature of the Ellington Orchestra's repertoire, whereby individual band members and their soloing styles may have contributed to the way in which pieces were performed and composed.**

**"A standard by which we may judge . . . highbrow composers"**<sup>6</sup>

Study of all genres of music, but particularly jazz, benefits from placing analysis of musical style within its socio-historical context. It is therefore fruitful to explain briefly Ellington's career path, highlighting key incidents and events that may have led to the stylistic trend under investigation.

Duke Ellington's musical career began when he moved to New York City in 1923. Although he had studied the piano as a teenager, and performed with his first band, Duke Ellington's Serenaders, in his native Washington DC, the kaleidoscope of influences and opportunities offered by New York provided his real training and development ground. Upon moving to the city, Ellington initially played piano in and soon came to lead a five-piece dance band, the Washingtonians. A significant turning point in his career came in 1927 when he and his band won a residency at New York's Cotton Club, a "black and tan" venue in Harlem. Black and tan clubs were racially segregated venues, in which black musicians and dancers performed for seated white audiences. As Mark Tucker comments, the Cotton Club was "patronized by wealthy whites, and staffed by blacks . . . put[ting] on high-powered music revues featuring sultry chorus girls, sensual choreography, exotic production numbers, and plenty of hot jazz."<sup>7</sup> The financial stability and regular performance opportunities afforded by this position enabled Ellington to expand his ensemble to three reeds, three trumpets, two trombones and a four-strong rhythm section. The new musicians included colorful musical personalities such as Johnny Hodges, Barney Bigard, Cootie Williams and Juan Tizol—all of whom contributed evocative and memorable instrumental solos to the group.<sup>8</sup> Duke Ellington composed prolifically for this ensemble, and the sophisticated compositions for these expanded instrumental forces he was able to create under these conditions led to the group becoming known as Duke Ellington's *Orchestra*. **This new name gave the ensemble connotations of classical music, while falling into line with the swing instrumentation of the time.** The Ellington Orchestra's Cotton Club residency ended in 1931, but the ensemble had almost fixed personnel from that point onwards, and Ellington wrote specifically for the abilities and stylistic subtleties of his musicians. Gunther Schuller even described the group's Cotton Club residency as a "five-year workshop period" for the compositional

<sup>6</sup>Constant Lambert, "The Spirit of Jazz," in Lambert, Constant, *Music Ho! A Study of Music in Decline* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 215.

<sup>7</sup>Mark Tucker, "Cotton Club Bandleader (1927–1932)," in Tucker, ed., 29.

<sup>8</sup>Trumpeter Bubber Miley had been with the group since 1923, and as Richard O. Boyer wrote in 1944, "stamped his character on the band, by means of the growl of his trumpet and his gutbucket technique." "The Hot Bach – 1," in Tucker, ed., 240.

development of Ellington.<sup>9</sup> As will become apparent, this could be a mixed blessing, for it simultaneously allowed the players to play in the style that they were most comfortable with, and entrenched them in a set style over time.

The Cotton Club era of Ellington's professional life was particularly significant, both for cementing his reputation as a jazz musician and bandleader, and for alerting the classical critical world to his abilities as a composer. The (white) owners and audiences at the Cotton Club and similar venues expected a certain type of entertainment from the (black) performers, which was derived from the song-and-dance forms of the plantation revues and associated caricatures of African culture.<sup>10</sup> It can be assumed that Ellington was aware of this situation, for rather than conform to the primitivist expectations of his audiences, he developed the "jungle style" of jazz in order to parody it. In a 1969 tribute to Ellington, Ralph Ellison recalled hearing "stylized jungle sounds (the like of which no African jungle had ever heard)" in the Ellington band's performances.<sup>11</sup> Knowing that Ellington composed adroitly in many other styles, it may be understood that the jungle style (which featured driving tom-tom rhythms, growling brass, and swooping saxophones) was a comment on the expectations of white audiences who had situated the black dancers and musicians as an exotic spectacle. Martin Williams concurs, and he implies a collaborative composition aspect of the jungle style, of which Miley's growling trumpet and an adaptation of the same effect for Juan Tizol's trombone were key features:

The superficially sensational and quasi-primitive effects actually had a deeper role: they were kept quite musical and compositionally intrinsic, and they were a means of exploration and growth for the orchestrator and the orchestra.<sup>12</sup>

A telling musical example of Ellington's growing command of the jazz style and an awareness of classical compositional technique is his 1927 piece, *Black and Tan Fantasy*. *Black and Tan Fantasy* combined sections of jungle style jazz with a quotation of Chopin's funeral march, implying not only a familiarity with classical repertoire but also a capacity to integrate it into his own compositions. This musical quotation is also undoubtedly an allusion to the revered New Orleans tradition of paraphrasing the funeral march as part of the jazz funeral marches.

For Ron Welburn, *Black and Tan Fantasy* is symptomatic of more than Ellington's growing musical abilities. Welburn identifies Ellington's music, more specifically *Black and Tan Fantasy*, as "the catalyst for a true jazz criticism." He explains how a series of record reviews by R. D. Darrell between 1927 and 1932 indicate the fashioning of

<sup>9</sup> Gunther Schuller, "Jazz," in *Musings: The Musical Worlds of Gunther Schuller* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Plantation revues were a popular exported (commonly to Britain and France) entertainment genre, in which black singers and dancers presented exaggerated and caricatured presentations of life in the Deep South, accompanied by jazz-inflected music, on the musical stage. The European success of plantation revues in the 1920s and '30s is discussed in greater detail by Catherine Parsonage in *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain, 1880–1935* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005), 163–190.

<sup>11</sup> Ralph Ellison, "Homage to Duke Ellington on His Birthday" (1969), in Tucker, ed., 396.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Williams, "Form Beyond Form," *The Jazz Tradition* (1970, revised 1983, 1993), reprinted in Tucker, ed., 404.

criteria for the evaluation of jazz that carried the same critical weight as the contemporary discourse surrounding classical music.<sup>13</sup> In 1927, Darrell wrote that:

In [*Black and Tan Fantasy*] the Washingtonians combine sonority and fine tonal qualities with some amazing eccentric instrumental effects. This record differs from similar ones by avoiding extremes, for while the “stunts” are exceptionally original and striking, they are performed musically, even artistically. A piece no one should miss! The snatch of the Chopin Funeral March at the end deserves special mention as a stroke of genius.<sup>14</sup>

In 1932, Darrell published an extended critical essay, in which he compared Ellington’s works to “great,” “serious” Western classical repertoire, and reinforced the classical-music ideal of the single musical *auteur*:

For all its fluidity and rhapsodic freedom it was no improvisation, tossed off by a group of talented virtuosi who would never be able to play it twice in the same way. It bore the indelible stamp of one mind, resourcefully inventive, yet primarily occupied not with the projection of effects or syncopated rhythms, but the concern of great music—tapping the inner world of feeling and experience.<sup>15</sup>

Darrell’s essay was published in *disques*, a journal usually devoted to new classical recordings. Darrell himself had a classical music education, and confidently and knowledgeably identified traits that distinguished Ellington as a composer. The publication of this article represented a recognition of the complexity that was possible within jazz compositions and performances—prior to this, jazz criticism had focussed predominantly on the emotions provoked and expounded by the music. Indeed, Darrell commended Ellington’s ability to synthesize music from the heart (which we may understand to mean African traditions) with learned music from the head (European traditions). He described Ellington as “a man who knows exactly what he is doing: exercising his intelligence, stretching to new limits his musicianship while he remains securely rooted in the fertile artistic soil of his race.”<sup>16</sup> Darrell borrowed evaluative musical criteria from the classical world, and praised features of Ellington’s works including: timbral integration, meshing of soloists and composed sections, quality of rhythm, quality of soloists, and dynamic range.

It is possible to see how the complexities of Ellington’s compositions prompted comparisons with classical music, even at this relatively early stage in his career. However, although the sonority and timbral color of his orchestra is praised as a vehicle for realizing his compositions, Darrell does not mention the improvisations and other contributions of band members in order to complete these works:

<sup>13</sup>Ron Welburn, “Duke Ellington’s Music: The Catalyst for a True Jazz Criticism,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 17 (1986): 111–122.

<sup>14</sup>R. D. Darrell, *Phonograph Monthly Review* (1927), in Tucker, ed., 33–34.

<sup>15</sup>R. D. Darrell, “Black Beauty,” *disques* (1932), in Tucker, ed., 57–65.

<sup>16</sup>Darrell, “Black Beauty,” 59. In a recent interview, British bebop saxophonist Dave O’Higgins highlighted the fact that all jazz musicians have an intuitive side and a schooled side. He emphasized the importance of combining these two elements of one’s ability musically. Dave O’Higgins (freelance saxophonist and jazz educator), in discussion with the author, February 2010. O’Higgins’ promotion of the dual musical personality of jazz musicians is testament to the profound and lasting effect these two sides of Ellington’s music had on the genre.

The most striking characteristic of all his works, and the one which stamps them ineradicably as his own, is the individuality and unity of style that weld composition, orchestration, and performance into one inseparable whole.<sup>17</sup>

Metaphors of organicism and musical unity as a measure of positive value in music have long been used in classical-music criticism, as explained at length by Janet Levy. Levy's primary thesis is that while classical musicology by the late 1980s lacked overt value judgments, thematic economy and organicism in works are generally understood to be representative of intelligent and cogent compositional structure, and are therefore desirable. She suggests a number of "covert and casual values" in musicology, of which "thematic economy is the primary value but textural and orchestral economy are also covertly prized."<sup>18</sup> Parallels can be seen between Darrell's valorization of musical unity in Ellington's output and Levy's recognition of thematic and textural economy in nineteenth-century classical repertoire.

This critical focus on Ellington as an individual was echoed by the composer and critic Aaron Copland, who wrote in 1938 that:

[T]he master of them all is Duke Ellington. The others [swing composers], by comparison, are hardly more than composer-arrangers. **Ellington is a composer, by which I mean, he comes nearer to knowing how to make a piece hang together than the others.**<sup>19</sup>

The year after Ellington's Cotton Club residency ended, he and his orchestra toured to Europe. European critics had taken a more academic approach to jazz from the start, in line with the methods used for classical music criticism.<sup>20</sup> A system of appreciation for jazz known as "record circles," or "rhythm clubs" had begun in the early 1930s. Fans would assemble for recitals of jazz records, and listen in appreciative silence to the music—bestowing an art status on jazz akin to that given to classical repertoire in concert halls.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, when Ellington and his orchestra arrived in Europe:

[He] found that Europeans regarded him as a composer rather than a bandleader or piano player; audiences came to hear the musicians as a concert orchestra, not as a dance band. *And* Ellington drew crowds, even breaking the box-office record at the London Palladium. At the Palladium, audiences could read about the band in a 24-page program that referred to Ellington's compositions as valid works of art.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Darrell, "Black Beauty," 61. Darrell's analysis follows the model of classical music criticism, in which the named composer is hailed as a hero figure. "Duke Ellington, a young Negro pianist, composer, and orchestra leader, gifted with a seemingly inexhaustible well of melodic invention, possessor of a keenly developed craftsmanship in composition and orchestration" (59).

<sup>18</sup>Janet M. Levy, "Covert and Casual Values in Recent Writings About Music," *Journal of Musicology* 5 (1987): 9.

<sup>19</sup>Aaron Copland, "Scores and Records," (1938), in Tucker, ed., 130.

<sup>20</sup>One possible reason for this differing reception of jazz in Europe is the lack of ingrained negative racial stereotypes about the performers, in the absence of an indigenous black population. This phenomenon is discussed in several recent chapters, for example Michael Pickering "'A Jet Ornament to Society': Black Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain," in *Black Music in Britain* ed. Paul Oliver (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1990), 16–33; and Hilary Moore, "'Dreams of Our Mothers' Ebony Eyes': 1980s Black Britain," *Inside British Jazz: Crossing Borders of Race, Nation and Class* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 98–127.

<sup>21</sup>Parsonage gives extensive background to the rhythm club phenomenon in *The Evolution of British Jazz*. Also see Katherine Williams (née Lewis), "Racism and Chauvinism in British Jazz, 1935–1954" (Masters' diss., University of Nottingham, 2008).

<sup>22</sup>Krin Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 168.



During this London tour, Ellington made a favorable impression on English critics including Constant Lambert, who described him as “a real composer, the first jazz composer of distinction, and the first Negro composer of distinction.”<sup>23</sup> In European criticism, too, it is possible to see that comparisons with classical composers and repertoire focus on Ellington the individual and his composed sections of music rather than his band men and their improvisation.

The focus on the individual in the jazz world was later challenged by the sociologist Paul Lopes, whose book adapts Howard Becker’s term to locate the rise of a jazz art world in the 1950s, suggesting that record producers, concert producers, club owners, music critics, magazine publishers, and diverse audiences all contributed to this trend. An example of a jazz art world can be seen on a smaller scale in the contribution of members of Duke Ellington’s Orchestra to the composition over time of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* as will be indicated by the following analysis. Due in part to these jazz art worlds, Lopes suggests a mid-century blurring of the boundaries between the typical construction of jazz as a low art form in opposition to the high art form of classical music.<sup>24</sup>

In 1943, Duke Ellington and his orchestra made their Carnegie Hall debut with the tone parallel *Black, Brown and Beige*, demonstrating that jazz in the concert hall was no longer a classically-trained white man’s domain. Ellington called the work a tone parallel in order to avoid overt references and comparisons to the classical form of tone poem, implying an astute awareness of existing tensions between the two genres. This highly programmatic work was intended to depict the “three main periods of Negro evolution,”<sup>25</sup> and prompted a slew of heated critical responses. John Hammond suggested in *Jazz* journal that Ellington had “deserted” jazz for more complex classical-based styles that were not suitable for dancing.<sup>26</sup> Another example of the prejudices held by jazz musicians and critics against classical is evident in the discourse that followed. Leonard Feather, who at this time was working as Ellington’s press agent, vehemently answered Hammond, stating:

Who the hell wants to dance in Carnegie Hall? And what does Hammond know about music for dancing, since he doesn’t even dance? Duke’s music has gone a little beyond the stage where it has to tickle the toes of a mob of jitterbugs. It is the only jazz that has combined the fundamental qualities of this musical idiom with the progress and advancement that are necessary to save it from stagnation.<sup>27</sup>

The issue seems to be less whether Ellington’s music could still be called “jazz” at this point (and indeed, he rejected the term himself) than whether jazz could be played in

<sup>23</sup>Lambert, 213.

<sup>24</sup>Paul Lopes, *The Rise of a Jazz Art World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>25</sup>Irving Kolodin, “Notes on the Program (1943)”, in Tucker, ed., 162.

<sup>26</sup>John Hammond, “Is the Duke Deserting Jazz?”, (1943), in Tucker, ed., 171–185.

<sup>27</sup>Leonard Feather [a rebuttal of Hammond] (1943), in Tucker, ed., 170.

the concert hall.<sup>28</sup> The 1943 concert marked the beginning of a series of annual concerts at Carnegie for Ellington, who composed several longer works for the occasions.

This brief survey of Ellington's career and the criticism inspired by his output suggests that, as compositional features commonly identified with classical music were identified in his works, he was able to change the format of his compositions from **three and a half minutes works suitable for recording** onto 78 rpm records into more extended works suitable for the concert hall. One work that could be **adapted** to suit both of these performance environments was *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*, which was first performed in 1937.<sup>29</sup>

**"A fully-fledged written composition with virtually no improvisation"**<sup>30</sup>

*Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* is a combination of two short numbers from the band's repertoire, linked by an interlude of varying length and content. Each composed "movement" was designed to fit onto one side of a 78 rpm record, and contained musical features valorized by the classical critical world juxtaposed with identifying characteristics of the swing style.

A brief description of pertinent aspects of the swing style is helpful here. Swing was intended for dancing, and went hand-in-hand with the craze for dancing to jazz in America in the 1930s and 1940s. In musical terms, swing went some way towards formalizing and codifying earlier styles of jazz. **The repertoire was carefully arranged and notated, and consisted of the repetition and development of short melodic fragments ("riffs") over repeated harmonic sequences.** Fixed spaces for improvised solos were composed into the music. Crucially, although the music was now more predetermined and had a diminished emphasis on improvisation than the earlier New Orleans and Chicago styles, **it was designed to sound spontaneous and improvisatory.**<sup>31</sup> Swing also drew upon the symphonic jazz of the 1920s in its reliance on notation and employment of expanded

<sup>28</sup>Ellington chose to eliminate the word "jazz" from his vocabulary when describing his works after 1943. Duke Ellington, *Music is My Mistress* (New York: Doubleday, 1973). Graham Locke also discusses Ellington's attitude towards the term "jazz" in *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton* (Durham and London: Duke University Press 2004 [1999]), 125–132.

<sup>29</sup>Ellington's ability to compose within the limitations of this format is also praised by Lambert. "Ellington's best works are written in what may be called ten-inch record form, and he is perhaps the only composer to raise this insignificant disc to the dignity of a definite genre. Into this three and a half minutes he compresses the utmost." Lambert, 215.

<sup>30</sup>Gunther Schuller, *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz, 1930–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 90.

<sup>31</sup>Cooke concurs with this description, writing in 2002: "When jazz is pre-composed the results need not sound unspontaneous: the big bands of the swing era and since have been characterised by complex textures designed to sound like massed improvisations, with head arrangements often transmitted and refined by experimentation and oral communication rather than by written charts." "Jazz among the Classics," 154.

instrumental forces. Swing bands consisted of a standard rhythm section (bass, piano, drums and sometimes guitar), and two or three each of saxophones, trombones and trumpets (the string sections of symphonic jazz orchestras had been discarded, although in an example of Ellington's unique use of tonal colour and instrumental timbre his music often featured the solo violin of Ray Nance). It is possible to see that Ellington's orchestra fell into line with swing instrumentation, although it had been achieved in a different fashion than to simply following the trend in jazz. The following section will explain how the composed content of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* both fulfilled the musical requirements of swing and employed various classical compositional devices.

Both numbers are structured around a repeated twelve-bar blues sequence, and in standard swing style, the material is based on short riff figures. As its title suggests, "Diminuendo in Blue" consists of a large-scale reduction of dynamic level and instrumental forces. It opens with a *fortissimo* eighth note-based riff and a sustained syncopated accompaniment (Example 1), which are passed between the saxophones and the brass. The piece is solidly in common (4/4) time, as befits the swing style, but both the riff and accompanying figure shown in Example 1 have a duration of three quarter notes—the combination of which creates cross-rhythms. **Conventional jazz phrasing is defied through the polyrhythms** created when, for example, the opening riff is heard five times in the first four bars. This rhythmic displacement was later labelled "secondary ragtime" by Mark Tucker, after Edward Berlin's characterization of an important and stylistically traditional technique in ragtime.<sup>32</sup> In addition, melodic ideas are passed seamlessly from section to section of the ensemble, creating the impression of longer phrases than the four bars usually heard in blues melodies and swing repertoire.

All of these features lead to an inversion of the by-now-standard, Henderson-style premise of swing repertoire.<sup>33</sup> In place of an exposition and development of simple riff figures, the most intense passage of Ellington's "Diminuendo in Blue" can be found within the opening phrases, and it is only after a few disjunct choruses that the piece settles into a clearly recognizable twelve-bar blues form. Ellington can thus be seen to use the familiar (swing style and riffs) as a foil for underlying complexity. **By opening with motivic fragmentation and rhythmic displacement that**

<sup>32</sup>Mark Tucker, *Ellington: The Early Years* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 134. Berlin explains: "It can be noted that this rhythmic pattern usually repeats the same three notes in either an ascending or a descending line, and that the pattern is most often produced four times. This is not syncopation, for there is no displacement of the normal metric accents. Within the three-note motif, however, the accent continually shifts; when the motif is presented four times, each presentation is in a new metric context." Edward A. Berlin, *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1980), 131.

<sup>33</sup>Jeffrey Magee characterizes Fletcher Henderson's arranging style thus: "The ingredients included many, if not consistently all, of the following: 1. A thirty-two-bar AABA popular-song structure based on an existing song or a new piece modelled on such a song. 2. Five or six choruses of that structure, in three distinct parts: (a) first chorus stating the melody. (b) an expandable series of interior choruses featuring improvised solos over sectional riffs, and (c) one (and sometimes two) 'out' choruses featuring the whole ensemble playing a new riff, sometimes presented in call-and-response style." Magee, *The Uncrowned King of Swing: Fletcher Henderson and Big Band Jazz* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 173.

**Example 1** Opening figure from “Diminuendo in Blue,” showing cross-rhythms between 3/4 and 4/4 in reeds and brass. *Duke Ellington et son Orchestre*, 0’00–0’06. Transcribed by Peter Long.

later settles into a simpler treatment of riffs and a steady swing feel, Ellington has inverted the usual paradigm of swing arrangements.

A gradual *diminuendo* is created as the music (built predominantly from the opening motif) decreases in dynamic level and pitch. This is followed by an interlude, which in the 1937 recording consisted of a syncopated piano bass line with rhythm section, to be faded dynamically to nothing.<sup>34</sup> The fade to silence masked the break in recording as the record was turned over. Mark Katz comments that: “The cessation in sound in turning the record over . . . is not a break in the music but its continuation, for the diminuendo ends and the crescendo begins at the same point: silence.”<sup>35</sup> “Diminuendo in Blue” passes through the keys of Eb, G, C, Ab and Db, indicating more compositional direction than conventionally heard in blues or swing numbers. (See Appendix 1 for a table giving more detail about the musical content and showing the key changes in this work.)

“Crescendo in Blue” opens with a low clarinet riff, answered by lower brass (Example 2). The work builds in dynamic level, pitch and texture until the whole

**Example 2** Opening reeds and lower brass figures from “Crescendo in Blue.” *Duke Ellington et son Orchestre*, 0’00–0’06. Transcribed by Peter Long.

band is playing under a high trumpet solo. Unlike “Diminuendo” and the interlude, “Crescendo” remains in Eb throughout.

<sup>34</sup>*Duke Ellington and His Famous Orchestra*, Brunswick: 8004, 1937, 78 rpm; reissued as *Duke Ellington et Son Orchestre, Duke Ellington: 1937* (Vol. 2), The Chronological Classics No. 687, 1993, compact disc. Due to recording limitations of the time, the piece is recorded as two separate tracks on this issue.

<sup>35</sup>Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 77.

Were this number to be played in isolation, it would follow the expected riff development pattern, by opening with a simple melodic figure and building in complexity to the end. Situated as it is as the second half of an extended composition, it represents the reverse. However, despite this reversal of expected arranging/composition styles, cohesiveness can be seen throughout in the classical compositional device of through-composition, which is evident in the work as a whole in the simple repetition of riffs, and the recurring interval of the minor third (which functions as a melodic

Reeds 

**“Diminuendo,” bb.1-4**

Trombone 



**“Diminuendo,” bb. 65-68**

Trombone   
 Tbn.   
 Tbn. 

**“Diminuendo,” bb. 101-12 (under baritone saxophone solo)**

Piano 

**Repeated two-bar figure from Interlude**

Reeds   
 Trombones 

**“Crescendo,” bb. 1-4**

**Example 3** recurring intervallic motif of m3. 0’00–0’06, “Diminuendo in Blue,” 1’22 – 1’28, “Diminuendo in Blue,” 2’09–2’24, “Diminuendo in Blue,” first heard 2’24–2’27 “Diminuendo in Blue,” 0’00–0’06, “Crescendo in Blue.” All taken from *Duke Ellington et son Orchestre* and transcribed by Peter Long.

motif, appearing in the opening riff of “Diminuendo,” trombone motifs, growling trumpet figures under the saxophone *solis*, accompaniment to the improvised baritone saxophone solo, and the opening riff to “Crescendo”. See Example 3).

Classical compositional ideals are also demonstrated in the clear harmonic structure, complex rhythms, and extended form of the work (it was more than twice as long as the standard “three-minute masterpieces” that represented the majority of Ellington’s output).<sup>36</sup> However in *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* Gunther Schuller found fault with the use of classical compositional devices in what was ostensibly a jazz work, lamenting a mis-judged confluence of the two styles:

Thematic and accompanimental materials are traded around between choirs of the orchestra in 2- and 4-bar sequences (or even shorter). This is compounded by an analogously abrupt exchange of unison lines with complex harmonic phrases. Whereas in earlier pieces Ellington might have constructed dramatic changes of texture between choruses, here he was doing so within chorus units, some of which were already complex in asymmetric divisions. Such relatively disjunct continuity was virtually unheard of in jazz in the mid-thirties, and it was not exactly conducive to easy finger-snapping listening. Moreover, for the sheer amount of harmonic, textural, and motivic activity in the opening measure of *Diminuendo*, the thematic material was not striking or strong enough to support or justify such complexity. Perhaps “motivic” rather than “thematic” would be a more accurate term to describe what we perceive as melodic material.<sup>37</sup>

Schuller’s criticisms of the work are easily outweighed by favourable comments from contemporary and later critics. For example, Wolfram Knauer valorizes these very same compositional devices as a means of achieving unity:

[*Creole Rhapsody*, *Reminiscing in Tempo*, and *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*] exceed the twelve- or thirty-two bar limit of the most common forms, so that formal unity in the arrangements is no longer achieved through the conventional means of chorus succession, but rather through compositional contrasts, and a toying with expectation and surprise.<sup>38</sup>

Cooke also refutes Schuller’s argument in his 2002 article, stating instead that revered composers such as Bach and Stravinsky as well as Ellington himself have often created intricate and interesting works from simple musical ideas. He comments favourably upon *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*:

By a cunning distortion of jazz clichés, Ellington applies dissonance and sequence in a resourceful scheme of interlocking and unpredictable antiphonal patterns, and creates harmonic instability by founding this highly fragmentary material on the roving changes of a 14-bar blues progression that is transposed several times. Only in the second half of the piece do the metrical and harmonic elements begin to stabilise into more familiar schemes and coalesce into a more conventional climax, and this

<sup>36</sup>Lambert, 215.

<sup>37</sup>Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 91.

<sup>38</sup>Wolfram Knauer, “‘Simulated Improvisation’ in Duke Ellington’s *Black, Brown and Beige*,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 18 (1990): 22.

shift from textural discontinuity to comforting coherence is managed with consummate compositional control.<sup>39</sup>

Many contemporary critics, such as the aforementioned Lambert, viewed the use of classical devices as an asset to Ellington's music, and a feature that could elevate the perception of jazz for other critics and the general public alike. For Lambert, Ellington's music marked a transition from the association of jazz with low-life and suspect moral values to a truly American music that could be evaluated on a par with classical music:

His works—apart from a few minor details—are not left to the caprice or ear of the instrumentalist; they are scored and written out, and though, in the course of time, variants may creep in – Ellington's works in this respect are as difficult to codify as those of Liszt – the first American record of his music may be taken definitively, like a full score, and are the only jazz records worth studying for their form as well as their texture.<sup>40</sup>

Lambert's comment shows some lack of comprehension about the organic nature of the Ellington repertoire, which tended to be built up of sections containing short, linked, musical ideas. These sections could be moved around within a piece at Ellington's will, and through-composition and design could still be heard. However, Lambert's statement regarding the Ellington Orchestra's recordings as fixed texts is insightful, and will be explored further in the following study of the changing nature of improvisation within *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*.

#### “The anchor of Duke's music”<sup>41</sup>

The one-chorus baritone saxophone solo that rises out of the texture towards the end of “Diminuendo” sounds like an improvised solo, for it is subtly different in each recorded performance under consideration. The following comparison of this solo on the three recordings over a period of nineteen years provides a springboard for an interrogation of Bruno Nettl's famous 1974 essay, in which he suggests that the placement of composition and improvisation as fundamentally different processes is false, and that the two are in fact part of the same idea. He suggests instead that we would “do well to think of composition and improvisation as opposite ends of a continuum.”<sup>42</sup>

The solo is played by Harry Carney, who joined Ellington's band in 1927 and remained with the group until Ellington's death. Carney was known to be a weak improviser, and study of Ellington's manuscript score of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* indicates that this solo was plotted in advance (Example 4 shows the composed framework that was provided by Ellington). This Ellingtonian technique was later identified as “simulated improvisation” by Knauer, and defined as “those parts of his arrangements which seem to be improvisational phrases invented more or less spontaneously, but

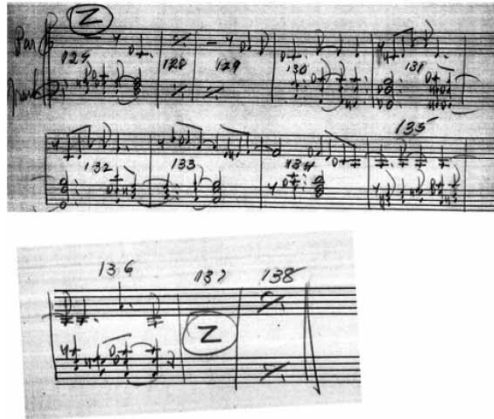
<sup>39</sup>Cooke, 162. Cooke's analysis of the development of musical material is enlightening, save for his inaccurate description of “fourteen-bar phrases.” *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* is based around a chromaticized twelve-bar blues sequence.

<sup>40</sup>Lambert, 213.

<sup>41</sup>Harry Carney website, New Musical Express. <<http://www.nme.com/artists/harry-carney>>.

<sup>42</sup>Bruno Nettl, “Thoughts on Improvisation; A Comparative Approach”, *Musical Quarterly* 50 (1974): 6.

which are actually thoroughly planned in advance by the composer/arranger.”<sup>43</sup> Knauer claims that this technique of simulated improvisation was first used by Ellington in *Black, Brown and Beige* (1943)—however, the following analysis will show that the device was in use at least six years prior to that.



**Example 4** Sketch of baritone saxophone solo, taken from Ellington’s original manuscript. Reproduced with permission of The Ellington Collection at The Smithsonian Institute.

Baritone Saxophone

**Example 5** Harry Carney’s solo, “Diminuendo in Blue,” 1937. *Duke Ellington et son Orchestre*, 2’09–2’24. Transcribed by the author.

In the first recording, from 1937, Carney creates a smooth melodic line that follows the movement of the underlying chord progression closely (Example 5). If the rhythm section were silenced, discerning listeners could work out the chord sequence from the arpeggiated nature of Carney’s solo.

The Ellington Orchestra embarked on many lengthy tours during the 1940s. The rigours of performing the same material every night during long stints on the road can be assumed to have contributed to improvised solos within the composed movements becoming more or less fixed. Peter Long comments on the

<sup>43</sup>Knauer, 21.



musical and lifestyle factors that contribute to this phenomenon for the touring musicians:

If you go out on the road with a band, especially on the frequency that . . . those bands would have done . . . you tend to find that if you get a short sixteen-bar solo, you tend to hone a routine down. So the solo evolves into something that's largely the same

Baritone Saxophone

5

9

Db7

Gb7

Db7

Ebm7

Db7

**Example 6** Harry Carney's solo, "Diminuendo in Blue," 1953. *Duke Ellington: The 1953 Pasadena Concert*, 2'12–2'25. Transcribed by the author.

every night. Because you're on the road, you can't think that hard, and you want to play something effective. So you start to think "well I'll do those things I did last night" – fifty gigs on, it's a routine, and the drummer then knows what's happening, so then the whole performance gets very tight.<sup>44</sup>

This phenomenon is supported by a comparison of Carney's 1937 solo with the solo he produced in the same place in a recording from 1953 (Example 6).<sup>45</sup>

Obvious similarities between the two solos outline the melodic characteristics and contours of the sketch provided by Ellington. However, it is possible to see increased melodic decoration by Carney, much in the manner of a classical cadenza. The solo can therefore be placed on the composition end of Nettle's spectrum, based on its pre-decided musical framework, with Carney only adding superficial decoration in performance.

Carney's baritone solo in the 1956 recording is composed of figures heard in both the 1937 and the 1953 performances (Example 7),<sup>46</sup> drawn from both Ellington's composed sketch and his own embellishments. The melodic shape remains unaltered, reinforcing the suggestion that this was not an improvised solo, and therefore follows the pattern of "simulated improvisation" identified by Knauer.<sup>47</sup>

Mark Katz suggests another reason for the fixing over time of solos—that of audience expectations:

<sup>44</sup>Peter Long, in discussion with the author, October 2009.

<sup>45</sup>*Duke Ellington: The 1953 Pasadena Concert*, GNP/Crescendo 9045, 1988, LP; reissued as *Duke Ellington: The 1953 Pasadena Concert*, GNP/Crescendo 9045, 2005, compact disc.

<sup>46</sup>*Ellington at Newport*, Columbia Records CC934, 1956, LP; reissued as *Ellington at Newport (complete)* Columbia/Legacy C2K 64932, 1999, compact disc.

<sup>47</sup>Knauer has located a similar instance of Carney reproducing and embellishing a pre-composed solo in "Work Song" from *Black, Brown and Beige*. Knauer, 26.

**Example 7** Carney's solo, "Diminuendo in Blue," 1956. *Ellington at Newport (complete)*, 3:04 – 3:28. Transcribed by the author.

A particular recording can become so well known and admired that listeners will want or expect to hear the piece performed in concert in exactly the same way. Performers may feel pressure to meet those expectations. In other words, familiarity may breed repetition. Yet when a performer reproduces an improvised solo exactly (or perhaps even mostly) as it had been executed the first time, it is no longer an improvisation. It becomes a composition—unnotated, but a composition nonetheless. Even if there was little improvisation on a particular recording, its widespread popularity may discourage subsequent performances from departing from the original. For example, when Duke Ellington performed his well-known works for the radio he hewed closely to the versions performed on 78, even though he was not constrained by the temporal limitation of the disc.<sup>48</sup>

Fixed performances that were intended to sound improvised became a feature of the Ellington Orchestra's repertoire over the 1940s. Long drew upon his extensive experience of the Ellington repertoire to explain this fact. "Certain solos," he stated, "were either learnt from the records or became part of the routine."<sup>49</sup> He continued, suggesting that fully pre-composed and notated Ellington works could still be considered part of the jazz tradition, as long as they belonged to the same sound world:

Jazz is largely an improvised music, and it derives its style from the musical sounds akin to improvisation. But some jazz exists without any improvisation at all. It still sounds like jazz. I bring as my evidence the fabulous 1940 composition *Concerto for Cootie* [Williams, a trumpeter]. Sounds just like 1940s jazz, but nobody's making anything up. There aren't even any fills or anything, he just plays the melody. He might drag the time around here or there, as a classical musician would, but that doesn't count as improvisation.<sup>50</sup>

The idea of solos becoming set in Ellington's compositions is not a new one: Roger Pryor Dodge commented upon the phenomenon in Bubber Miley's playing as early as 1940:

Miley was a player who, sometimes more sometimes less, set his solos. In other words, after he had played a piece many times he was not exactly improvising

<sup>48</sup>Katz, 80.

<sup>49</sup>Long.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*

from then on. What he did was play a developed version of an earlier improvisation . . . Bubber was a musician who could musically so crystallize an improvisation that the improvisation did not die after the impeccable white-heat delivery of its first presentation; his new outline had such backbone that it, in turn, could be used to take off from. In other words, another musician without playing the actual notes of the original improvisation, perhaps not even in the same style, could simply keep the general outline of Bubber's head as you would sing a song, and improvise a new solo, not on the original tune or chordal foundation, but on Bubber's already improvised solo.<sup>51</sup>

Roger Pryor Dodge's analysis of the role of Miley's improvisation leads me to suggest that Ellington's band members contributed musical material to his compositions to varying degrees by fixing improvised solos over time. Carney's solo is representative of a low level of musical contribution by the individual, while Miley's suggests a higher degree of collaboration in the creation of the musical work. John Howland concurs in his 2009 monograph, writing that:

[A] team approach to the creative process was . . . very much the norm in big band jazz, where creative collaboration could include score contributions and refinements by band members, the individual improvisational components in a score, the contribution of improvised and paraphrased solos (where a player elaborated upon a pre-composed passage in a score) that became set score materials over time, the unique instrumental voices in any given orchestra, and so on. This was Ellington's compositional milieu.<sup>52</sup>

This collaborative approach opposes the valorization of the single musical *auteur* as prized by Darrell in 1927.

### Ellington's piano and the interlude

It is a common understanding that Ellington edited his compositions throughout his performing life.<sup>53</sup> Walter van de Leur reinforces this understanding, by referring to Ellington's "streetwise composition techniques"<sup>54</sup> and later elaborating that Ellington often took musical contributions from his musicians as his cue for editing his compositions:

Revising music formed an integral and essential element in Ellington's writing. He knew he was going to edit his scores extensively at rehearsals and recording sessions, take things out, change blocks of music around, infuse material written earlier, or adopt an idea from any of his band members, honing the final form of the piece through a process of trial and error. As a result, the transitions in many Ellington compositions are relatively abrupt, the key changes often sudden, and the caesuras between sections usually sharp and clearly audible.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup>Roger Pryor Dodge, "Bubber," (1940), in Tucker, ed., 457.

<sup>52</sup>John Howland, *Ellington Uptown: Duke Ellington, James P. Johnson, and the Birth of Concert Jazz* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009), 264,

<sup>53</sup>Long comments that: "one of the many reasons why Ellington was such a genius was his ability to edit . . . [his music is] highly structured, but only because he was able to do that [edit] on the spot." Long.

<sup>54</sup>Walter van de Leur, *Something to Live For: The Music of Billy Strayhorn* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 35.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 108.

This can be illustrated by tracing the performance trajectory of the interlude in *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*, alongside the changing role of Ellington's own piano playing.

Ellington's piano plays a subsidiary role in the 1937 recording, and is only heard for structural purposes in the syncopated descending riff (heard in the right hand) of the interlude. In this version, the interlude is simply used to fade the music to silence. However, this would not suffice for live performance, in which the compositional device intended to suit the recorded medium would be inappropriate. Consequently, Ellington was consistently searching for material to fill the interlude between the movements. One solution he experimented with was using another contrasting number from the band's repertoire, *Transblucency*, as a slow middle movement. *Transblucency* was a slow blues, voiced for trombones and clarinet in the style of *Mood Indigo*, and featured the vocalese of coloratura singer Kay Davis. The 1946 concert in the Ellington Orchestra's Carnegie Hall series included a "newly expanded arrangement of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*, entitled *Diminuendo in Blue/Transblucency/Crescendo in Blue*,"<sup>56</sup> indicating that this swing-based work was considered to be suitable for concert performance at this time.

When tenor saxophonist Paul Gonsalves joined the orchestra in 1950, live performances of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* evolved still further. The piece was reinvented as an uptempo cut-time (2/2) feature for Gonsalves, who had developed his skills as a bebop improviser playing in groups with Count Basie and Dizzy Gillespie.<sup>57</sup> This tempo change was also in keeping with the fact that the trend for swing dancing had virtually ended by this point, and jazz audiences tended instead to listen to jazz played at faster speeds. Ellington reinstated the interlude from 1937, and extended it into a multi-chorus improvised feature for Gonsalves. This represents yet another example of Ellington playing to his musicians' strengths, and editing his works to suit different performance contexts. Duke Ellington's piano playing has a greater role in the 1953 recording, as he comps over band figures in both movements.<sup>58</sup> The syncopated piano interlude is constructed from similar material to the earlier version, but here the syncopated figures are featured in the left hand with accompanying block chords in the right. It is possible to hear a slow working out of ideas in these two versions of the piano material of the interlude. Ellington then improvises one chorus (in the usual, spontaneous, sense of the word improvise). Gonsalves then plays seven choruses accompanied by rhythm section. His improvisation is in the bebop style, consisting of lengthy passages of quavers, off-beat accents and complex harmonic substitutions. The solo is technically virtuosic, as demonstrated by the ease with which he plays in all registers of the saxophone (although he rarely ventures into the upper harmonics, something which other contemporaneous saxophonists such as Paul Desmond were beginning to make a feature of their performance style

<sup>56</sup>Howland, 252.

<sup>57</sup>The 1937 recording was played at quarter-note = 164, while the two versions from the 1950s were played at half-note = 120.

<sup>58</sup>"Comping" is a term used by jazz musicians to refer to pianists playing chords to outline the harmonic progression, using no fixed rhythmic pattern.

at this time). After Gonsalves' solo, Ellington comps for two further choruses, which covers applause for Gonsalves, and then he melodically improvises two choruses before the band re-enter with "Crescendo." It is possible to see that Ellington is using his own pianistic skills as filler between the predecided sections of the performance.

The use of Ellington's piano improvisation as filler between predetermined sections is consolidated in the recording from 1956. Here he opens the work with four choruses of piano improvisation, which in one place foreshadows the main melodic component of "Diminuendo" (Example 8, foreshadowing the material of Example 1), providing coherence between the improvised and composed material and suggesting forward planning and perhaps predetermination. Ellington introduces the interlude with the same syncopated material heard in the 1937 recording and developed in 1953, followed by two choruses of sparing piano improvisation. Yet again, in the piano material of the interlude, it is possible to see something that began as improvisation edging towards the composition end of Nettl's spectrum. Through repeated performance, improvisation becomes fixed—or at least, a small collection of interchangeable phrases are drawn upon. This 1956 performance at the Newport Jazz Festival has been hailed as a milestone in jazz, due in large part to a twenty-seven chorus improvised solo by Gonsalves in the interlude. This solo was met with almost universal acclaim, and has been hailed as "one of the longest and most unusual tenor sax solos ever captured on record."<sup>59</sup> It is undoubtedly an unusually long improvisation, but it is very interesting to reflect on the similarities between this 1956 performance and the earlier 1953 recording. Again, Gonsalves is playing in the bebop style. His improvisation is based on short motives (or licks), which he typically develops for the duration of one blues chorus. The solo is clearly planned to some extent, for it follows the same melodic shape as his interlude in the 1953 version. At some points, he also manipulates the articulation of eighth note passages to imply 3/4, which rhythmically refers to the cross-rhythms in the opening riff of "Diminuendo" (Example 9). The solo is similar but in no place identical to the earlier version, suggesting stylistic consistency rather than strict predetermination.



**Example 8** Ellington's piano solo foreshadowing "Diminuendo in Blue" opening motive (Example 1). *Ellington at Newport (complete)*, 0:15 – 0:16. Transcribed by the author.



**Example 9** Gonsalves' solo, cross-rhythms implying 3/4, which references Example 1. *Ellington at Newport (complete)*, 4:44 – 4:49. Transcribed by the author.

<sup>59</sup>George Avakian, original LP liner notes to *Ellington at Newport*, 1956.

It is interesting to consider that while this performance as a whole is remembered for its improvised content, other aspects of it suggest the solidification of a performance routine that was designed to *sound* spontaneous, but was actually heavily rehearsed.

Gonsalves' solos seem much more spontaneous than either Carney's baritone solo or Ellington's piano interlude. However, as numerous scholarly articles and jazz musicians have testified, "improvisation" actually consists of rearranging and re-contextualizing pre-learned phrases and fragments.<sup>60</sup> These "building blocks" can be of any size. The building blocks (or licks) used by Gonsalves are short, and can be re-arranged in a vast number of ways. The shorter building blocks create a more spontaneous sound than the longer phrases or building blocks used by Carney and Ellington, which came, over time, to be recognizable. The two saxophonists are representative of soloing approaches at either end of Nettl's composition-improvisation spectrum, with Ellington's approach falling in between.

After Gonsalves' interlude, Ellington improvises three choruses with rhythm section to connect the interlude with "Crescendo."<sup>61</sup> This device of linking classical-influenced material (as seen in Ellington's composed sections) and improvised (Gonsalves' solo) with contrasting musical material (the quasi-improvised material of Carney's solo and Ellington's piano interlude) can be seen as a precursor to the Third Stream repertoire of the late 1950s.<sup>62</sup> Other 1930s and 1940s examples of classical and jazz fusions that fed into the development of Third Stream include jazz fugues by Billy Strayhorn and Mary-Lou Williams, indicating that the term "Third Stream" rather than the concept was new.

While Ellington's compositional devices have been recognized as a model for Third Stream, John Howland views Ellington as part of an earlier tradition. Howland situates Ellington as part of the symphonic jazz tradition (of which Paul Whiteman was a famous early exponent). Howland explains how the symphonic jazz genre has largely

<sup>60</sup>For example, Ellington's own opinions on improvisation were well-documented: "There are still a few die-hards who believe . . . [that] there is such a thing as unadulterated improvisation without any preparation or anticipation. It is my firm belief that there has never been anybody who has blown even two bars worth listening to who didn't have some idea about what he was going to play, before he started. If you just ramble through the scales or play around the chords, that's nothing more than musical exercise. Improvisation really consists of picking out a device here, and connecting it with a device there; changing the rhythm here, and pausing there; there has to be some thought preceding each phrase, otherwise it is meaningless." Ellington, "The Future of Jazz" (1958), in Ken Rattenbury, *Duke Ellington, Jazz Composer* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 14.

<sup>61</sup>Ellington's use of his own improvisation to link sections of contrasting material was not a new device. Max Harrison wrote unfavourably about the use of the device in Ellington's large-scale 1931 composition *Creole Rhapsody*: "*Creole Rhapsody* is at its weakest when Ellington, having got stuck, throws in bridging piano solos, almost literally to make ends meet." "Some Reflections on Ellington's Longer Works," reprinted in Tucker, ed., 388.

<sup>62</sup>Under Gunther Schuller's formulation, the "first stream" classical and the "second stream" of jazz were combined equally into a "third stream." Works in this style, such as Rolf Liebermann's *Concerto for Jazz Band and Symphony Orchestra*, and John Dankworth and Mátyás Seiber's *Improvisations for Jazz Band and Symphony Orchestra*, often featured sections in a contrasting musical style to link passages played by each ensemble. Schuller himself also actively composed in the Third Stream style. Gunther Schuller, "And perhaps the Twain Shall Meet," *New York Times*, 15 November 1959. It is important to consider that, while Third Stream appeared to be an ideal solution to the implicit cultural hierarchy of classical music and jazz, the terminology and music involved was loaded with ideological pitfalls. For example, even by designating the two genres to be combined the "first" and "second" streams, Schuller was promoting a value judgement that defied the equal fusion to which he aspired.

been overlooked in music scholarship, due in large part to falling in the “cultural gap between the venerated ‘art music’ canons of authentic jazz (where these works are seen as too ‘pretentious,’ ‘classical,’ or ‘symphonic’) and classical music (where these works are seen as too ‘entertaining’ or not ‘serious’ enough).”<sup>63</sup>

Howland convincingly argues—through a series of detailed analytical charts—that Ellington’s extended compositions *Creole Rhapsody* and *Black, Brown and Beige* adapted, extended and transcended the formal models of 1920s symphonic jazz. A parallel argument is that the appeal of Ellington’s music to audiences from all social backgrounds allowed the music to transcend cultural boundaries and reinforce the elevation of jazz from a street music to a concert art form. This is illustrated by *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*, which transforms a seemingly innocuous riff-based blues into a large-scale jazz composition suitable for performance at Carnegie Hall.<sup>64</sup>

### Conclusion

By 1956, performances of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* not only juxtaposed classical compositional features with jazz riffs and harmonies, but simultaneously realized the performance ideals of each genre: reproduction from a score or memory could be heard, as could spontaneous improvisation. Study of this work has shown that swing music, while sounding improvised and spontaneous, could actually be composed and prepared in a sophisticated fashion, and leave little to chance in performance, thus supporting Lambert’s opinion that Ellington’s works were fixed texts.<sup>65</sup> The fact that Lambert was writing in 1934, before this work had been composed, suggests that this was a general stylistic trait rather than a solitary occurrence that was only demonstrated in this instance. As the comparison of three versions of Carney’s baritone solo has indicated, much “improvisation” within the composed material appears to have taken predetermined forms, and a degree of collaborative composition is indicated. The consideration of the superficial level of Carney’s melodic contributions compared to the input of, for example, Bubber Miley in other cases within the Ellington repertoire (in which he created his own solo and then repeated the same material in all performing situations) contributes to the idea of varying degrees of collaborative composition expressed

<sup>63</sup>Howland, 7.

<sup>64</sup>Howland also offers a working definition of the term “jazz composition” for musicians in the late 1930s: “‘jazz composition’ was defined specifically through sophisticated big band arrangements that balanced written scores and detailed orchestration with room for improvisation contributions; which relied upon a performing collective of individual musical voices and which embraced African American musical aesthetics” (179).

<sup>65</sup>Mark Katz offers an alternative reason for this phenomenon, suggesting that the limitations of the three-minute record technology impinged upon musicians’ improvisational creativity. “If a musician were to play several solo choruses in a live performance, it is unlikely that *all* the solos would have been fixed. In other words, the longer the performance and the more solos played, the more the performers were apt to improvise. The corollary is that a shorter performance with fewer solos made improvisation *less* likely. Knowing that time was short and aware of the permanence of recordings, performers and their bandleaders would want not only to choose their best work to commit to shellac but also to ensure that all solos stayed within a prescribed time.” Katz, 76.

throughout this article, and to some degree the debunking of Ellington's "great man" status in the history of jazz.

The narrowing of the margin between high and low art in Lopes' jazz art world is reflected in the softening of the distinction between improvisation (and its associations with jazz) and composition (and its association with classical) seen in the evolution of Ellington's *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*.

Three kinds of musical material have been revealed: fully composed and notated sections (as described in my analysis of the score), which fall on the composition end of Nettl's spectrum; heavily planned improvisation that uses long building blocks which falls somewhere in the middle (Carney's solo and Ellington's piano interlude); and more spontaneous improvisation using shorter building blocks (Gonsalves' solo), which comes at the other end of the spectrum. When considering the supposed dichotomy between classical and jazz performance and compositional ideals, it is particularly interesting to consider the middle kind of material, which does not differ significantly from the interpretative reproduction of works from the classical canon in performance. As Nicholas Cook argued in response to Nettl:

The attempt to locate a point where improvisation gives way to reproduction as the referent becomes more detailed fails because the idea of the wholly autonomous music work, needing nothing but reproduction, is a chimera . . . the performance of the precomposed never can exist without some element of improvisation.<sup>66</sup>

For many critics, the classical musical values evident in the composed elements of Ellington's works led them to question whether he was still composing in the jazz idiom. Study and theorizing about these performances of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* has led me to conclude with an addition to this discursive tradition: the increasing sophistication and fixity of performance in the "improvised" sections of his works shows that Ellington and his musicians were also able to fulfill classical values in performance, while remaining firmly within the swing tradition.

### Abstract

Since the beginning of Duke Ellington's career as composer and leader of his own jazz orchestra in the 1920s, a common critical theme has been the comparison with European art music composers such as Delius and Debussy. Assertions such as Constant Lambert's 1934 statement that Duke Ellington set a "standard by which we may judge . . . highbrow composers" focused on the complex compositional devices in his output. Rather than restate these oft-cited judgements of Ellington's compositional style, this paper examines the intersection between the classical and jazz styles by analyzing typically *improvised* sections of Ellington's output.

Consideration of the development of a baritone saxophone solo, improvised

<sup>66</sup>Nicholas Cook, "Making Music Together, or Improvisation and Its Others," *Music, Performance, Meaning: Selected Essays* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 335.



material in the interlude, and the role of Ellington's piano in three recordings of his 1937 *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* (from 1937, 1953 and 1956) indicate the establishment of fixed solos in the Ellington Orchestra's repertoire. The degree of composition implied by this warrants further thought. Through analysis of Ellington's original sketches for the piece, close study of these recordings, and engagement with contemporary criticism and later scholarly sources (in particular the writings of Bruno Nettl) I evaluate the implications of the predetermination suggested by the treatment of improvisation by Ellington and his band members over this period.

Appendix 1: Table showing Musical Content of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*.

<i>Diminuendo in Blue</i>		
Time on Recording	Key	Musical Features
00:00:00	E $\flat$	Full band enter, with unison clarinets and alto and tenor saxophone playing a 3/4 quaver figure, and brass playing sustained 3/4 figures. The blues is referenced through the use of the flattened seventh and minor third.
00:37:00	G	Two-bar call and response between brass and saxophones, ascending and descending melodically. No piano can be heard in this section.
01:06:00	C	Short (half to one bar) call and response phrases between saxophones and trumpets. Phrases cross beat and bar-line divisions.
01:22:00	A $\flat$	Four-bar phrases outlining minor third in trombones, shorter answering phrases of similar melodic nature in saxophones.
01:36:00	D $\flat$	Saxophone <i>sol</i> i – lyrical melody based on four-bar phrases with syncopation across bar lines.
Time on Recording	Key	Musical Features
01:56:00		Texture thins to <i>legato</i> riffs in saxophones, over solo growling trumpet figures. Ellington's earlier jungle style is referenced through the timbre of the trumpet and further use of the minor-third interval. No piano can be heard here, although bass and drums continue 4/4 movement.

*Continued*

## Appendix 1: Continued

*Diminuendo in Blue*

02:10:00	Baritone saxophone solo, accompanied by short minor-third figures. Baritone plays a six-bar improvisation within a twelve-bar blues framework.
02:24:00	Piano and rhythm section interlude. Piano plays descending syncopated two-bar figures, which diminuendo and slows over a chorus, before vamping on the tonic riff to fade out. These figures foreshadow the interlude in later recordings of the work.

*Crescendo in Blue*

<b>Time on Recording</b>	<b>Key</b>	<b>Musical Features</b>
00:00:00	E $\flat$ throughout	Clarinets play unison low riff, answered by longer figures in trombones in simple harmony.
00:55:00		Improvised clarinet solo in two-bar spaces between band figures.
02:24:00		High trumpet solo over band riffs.