”Is the Duke Deserting Jazz?”: Classicisation through Improvisation in *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*

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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” focussed on the complex compositional devices in his output. Rather than restate these off-cited judgements of Ellington’s compositional style, this paper examines the intersection between the classical and jazz styles by analysing typically *improvised* sections of Ellington’s work.

Consideration of the development of an improvised baritone saxophone solo, improvised 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) indicates the establishment of fixed solos in the Ellington Orchestra’s repertoire. The degree of composition implied by this warrants further thought. Through close study of these

recordings and engagement with contemporary criticism and later scholarly sources (focussing particularly on the writings of Bruno Nettl, 1974) I evaluate the implications of the predetermination suggested by Ellington's treatment of improvisation over this period.

Keywords: Duke Ellington, *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*, composition, improvisation, classicisation

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Introduction

Duke Ellington's career as a jazz composer began in the 1920s, and the comparison with European composers of classical music such as Delius and Debussy has been a common critical theme ever since.[1] In 1934, Constant Lambert (p. 215) even described Ellington as "a standard by which we may judge … highbrow composers." This paper will briefly explain some aspects of Ellington's compositional style that contribute to these judgements, before explaining ways in which the changing role of *improvisation* in his works suggests the coexistence of jazz and classical techniques in his output. Rather than propose a black and white distinction between notated, composed or classical music and improvised,

so-called spontaneous "jazz", I address the similarities between the two with particular reference to the writings of Bruno Nettl (1974).

It is a common understanding that Duke Ellington (1899–1974) edited his compositions throughout his performing career. Walter van de Leur, biographer of Ellington's longstanding arranger Billy Strayhorn, writes that:

> 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. (van de Leur, 2002: 108)

This editing process, or long-term compositional process, can be illustrated by a comparison of three recordings of Ellington's 1937 composition *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*. This paper will explain how the differing emphasis placed on improvisation and composed material in each version raises important issues about the changing nature of Ellington's musical style. The recordings under consideration are a 1937 studio recording, a recording of the work at a live concert in 1953, and a recording of the famous Newport Jazz Festival performance in 1956. I will consider the impact of extra-musical influences – such as the limitations of recording and the consequences of prolonged touring – on the spontaneity of improvisation. I will first explain the structure of the composed sections of the work, before illustrating the role of an improvised baritone saxophone solo, Ellington's piano playing, and the function of the interlude in each recording. I hope to show that, as well as containing *compositional* features that critics could align with art music composers, performances of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* also exhibited classical *performance* ideals.

"A fully-fledged written composition" (Schuller, 1989: 90)

Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue is an example of the swing style of jazz, which was popular in the 1930s and early 1940s. A brief description of pertinent features of swing is useful here, in order to contextualise musical features understood by critics to be more in tune with classical music than jazz. Swing music was intended for dancing, and went some way

towards formalising and codifying earlier styles of jazz. The repertoire was carefully arranged and notated, and consisted of the repetition and development of short melodic fragments (known as 'riffs') over repeated harmonic sequences. Fixed spaces for improvised solos were composed into the music, thereby diminishing the importance of improvisation compared to earlier hot jazz styles. Swing also drew upon the symphonic jazz of the 1920s in its reliance on notation and employment of expanded instrumental forces. Swing bands consisted of a standard rhythm section, and two or three each of saxophones, trumpets and trombones (the string sections of symphonic jazz ensembles had been discarded).

Ellington's original five-piece band, the Washingtonians, was able to expand to three reeds, three trumpets, two trombones and a four-strong rhythm section in the late 1920s, when the ensemble gained a residency at New York's Cotton Club. The new musicians included such colourful musical personalities as Johnny Hodges, Barney Bigard, Cootie Williams and Juan Tizol. Ellington composed prolifically for this ensemble, who performed his compositions regularly. The sophisticated compositions that he created for these expanded instrumental forces led to the group becoming known as Duke Ellington's *Orchestra*. The group therefore fell into line with swing instrumentation, but also carried connotations of classical music. The Cotton Club residency ended in 1932, but the ensemble had almost fixed personnel from that point onwards, and Ellington wrote specifically for the abilities and stylistic subtleties of his musicians. As will become apparent, this could be a mixed blessing, for it simultaneously allowed the players to play in the style with which they were most comfortable, and entrenched them in a set style over time.

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 section was designed to fit on one side of a 78 record. As its title suggests, *Diminuendo in Blue* consists of a large-scale reduction of dynamic level and instrumental forces. This was followed by an interlude, featuring a syncopated piano bassline with rhythm section, to be faded dynamically to nothing. The fade to silence masked the break in recording when the record was turned over. Mark Katz (2004: 77) comments that: "the cessation of 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." *Crescendo* opens with a low clarinet riff, answered by lower brass. The work builds in dynamic level, pitch and texture until the whole band is

playing under a high trumpet solo to close. Both numbers are structured around a repeated twelve-bar blues sequence, heard in the keys of Eb, G, C, Ab and Db in *Diminuendo*, and Db, C and E in the interlude, while *Crescendo* remains in Eb throughout. The riff-based material of both movements is consistent with the swing style, and in *Crescendo* as in *Diminuendo* these riffs are three beats long, which creates cross-rhythms within the four-four swing feel of the piece. Although superficially appearing to follow jazz conventions of the time, the work is more complex in harmonic structure and phrase construction than many contemporary works of other swing composers.

Compositional ideals of classical music are demonstrated in the clear harmonic structure, complex rhythms, and through-composition of the work. As Gunther Schuller (1989: 90) noted: "*Diminuendo and Crescendo* in its original 1937 form was … a fully-fledged written composition with virtually no improvisation."

The English critic Constant Lambert (1934: 186) also praised the classical ideals he heard in Ellington's works, and wrote that: "Ellington … is a real composer, the first jazz composer of distinction, and the first Negro composer of distinction".

Lambert's words can be read as prophetic, however, for he continues by saying that:

> [Ellington's] 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 … the first American records 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. (1934: 186–188.)

The Anchor of Duke's Music: Harry Carney

The 1937 studio recording of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* is in a steady four-four, which reflects the tempos needed for the fashion for swing dancing at this time. It can be expected that the one-chorus baritone saxophone solo that rises out of the texture towards the end of *Diminuendo* began life as an improvised solo, for it is marked in a rehearsal score as chord symbols rather than notation. This definition of improvisation is commonly held, and is supported by a recent

interview I conducted with Pete Long (2009), a London-based session saxophonist.[2] However, in his famous 1974 essay, Bruno Nettl 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." (Nettl 1974: 6) This idea is supported by Paul Berliner (1994: 221–2), who suggests that improvisation is often a manipulation of preconceived melodic ideas within new musical contexts. The baritone solo is played by Harry Carney, who joined the Ellington Orchestra in 1927, and remained with the group for the entirety of Ellington's performing career (Figure 1)[3].

Figure 1: Carney's 1937 baritone 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 could have contributed to "improvised" solos within the composed movements becoming fixed. This can be illustrated by a comparison of Carney's 1937 baritone solo with the solo he played in the 1953 recording (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Carney's 1953 baritone solo

Long comments on the 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 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. (Long, 2009)

There are obvious similarities between the solos, suggesting that the melodic characteristics and contours of the "improvisation" had become integral to the performance of the piece. Nettl's definition of improvisation applies even more once it is understood that Carney borrowed heavily from his earlier performance. The solo edges away from the improvisation end of Nettl's composition-improvisation spectrum. The tempo and groove of the piece have also been drastically altered by this time, which will be explained shortly.

Figure 3: Carney's 1956 baritone solo

Carney's baritone solo in the 1956 recording is composed of figures heard in both the 1947 and 1953 versions (Figure 3). The fact that in 1956 Carney drew on licks from both earlier solos suggests that he had a repertoire of phrases, or "building blocks", to use another of Nettl's terms, at his disposal. The melodic shape remains unaltered, reinforcing the idea that this was not an improvised solo, but more like a predetermined cadenza in the classical style that added to Ellington's composition. It now becomes clear that Carney's solo can be seen to fall mid-way on Nettl's composition-improvisation spectrum, and perhaps is indica-

tive of a slower 'working-out' of ideas than is commonly expected in improvisation.

Ellington's Piano and the Interlude

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 nothing (and turn the record over). However, this would not suffice for live performances, and throughout the 1940s, Ellington experimented with new material to fill the interlude, sometimes even inserting an entire contrasting number from the band's repertoire.

When tenor saxophonist Paul Gonsalves joined the orchestra in 1950, *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* was reinvented as an uptempo cut-time blues feature for him. This tempo change is 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, which is 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. The syncopated piano interlude is constructed from similar material to that of the earlier version, but here the syncopated figures are heard in the left hand with accompanying block chords in the right. Ellington then improvises one chorus (in the usual, spontaneous, sense of the word improvise). In this 1953 recording, Gonsalves 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. As with the development of Harry Carney's solo over time, it is possible to hear a working out of ideas in these two versions of the syncopated piano material in the interlude. After Gonsalves' solo, Ellington comps for two 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, which is a relatively simple process on a piece with a repeated chord sequence.

The use of Ellington's piano improvisation as filler between sections is consolidated in the recording from 1956. Here he opens the work with four choruses of improvisation, which in one place foreshadows the main melodic component of *Diminuendo*, thus providing coherence between the improvised and composed material and suggesting forward planning and perhaps predetermination (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Ellington's improvised piano, introduction to 1956 version, foreshadowing *Diminuendo*

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, it is possible to see something that began as improvisation edging towards the composition end of Nettl's spectrum. In the case of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*, through repeated performance, improvisation becomes fixed – or at least, a small collection of interchangeable phrases are drawn upon. As in the 1953 version, it is possible to tell from the nature of Ellington's improvisation that he is using his own solo as a filler between predecided sections, for he plays a series of turnaround chords, leading into Gonsalves' solo – a pianistic device that was beginning to be worked out in the 1953 performance. The 1956 Newport performance has been hailed as a milestone in jazz, due in large part to a twenty-seven chorus improvised solo by Gonsalves. An interesting historical aside here is that 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" (Avakian, 1956). It *is* 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 followed the same melodic shape as his interlude in the 1953 version. At some points, he also manipulates the articulation of quaver passages to imply 3/4, which musically refers to the opening riff of *Diminuendo* (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Gonsalve's 1956 improvised interlude, 3/4 cross-rhythms reference composed material

The solo is similar but in no place identical to the earlier version, suggesting stylistic consistency rather than strict predetermination. 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. That said, 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 recontextualising pre-learnt phrases and fragments.[4] 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 over time came to be recognisable. Gonsalves can therefore be placed closer to the improvisation side of Nettl's continuum. After Gonsalves' interlude, Ellington improvises three choruses with the rhythm section to connect the interlude with *Crescendo*. The device of linking composed material to improvised with a piano solo indicates that Ellington realised that the differences between improvised music and composed music were too great for the two to be immediately juxtaposed. Although the bridging piano solos are improvised, the texture and feel of the music is abruptly altered, preparing the ear for the new material that followed.

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) is a precursor to the third stream repertoire of the late 1950s. In third stream the "first stream" of 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 Orchestra*, and John Dankworth and Mátyás Seiber's *Improvisations for Jazz Band and Symphony Orchestra* often featured sections in a contrasting musical style to connect passages played by each ensemble.

Conclusion

By 1956, performances of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* not only juxtaposed classical compositional features with jazz riffs and harmonies, but simultaneously realised the performance ideals of each genre: reproduction from a score or memory *and* spontaneous improvisation could be heard. Study of this work has shown that swing music, while sounding improvised and spontaneous, could actually be composed and prepared in a sophisticated manner, and leave little to chance in performance, thus supporting Lambert's opinion that Ellington's works were set texts. The fact that Lambert was writing in 1934, before this work had been composed, suggests that this was a general Ellingtonian stylistic trait rather than an isolated case. 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. Three kinds of musical material have been revealed: fully composed and notated sections, which fall on the composition end of Nettl's spectrum; heavily planned improvisation that uses long building blocks which falls somewhere in the middle; and more spontaneous improvisation using shorter building blocks, which comes at the other end. 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 musical work, needing nothing but reproduction, is a chimera … the performance of the precomposed never can exist without some element of improvisation. (Cook, 2007: 335)

While for many critics such as John Hammond (1943), the increasing sophistication and fixity of performance in Ellington's works through time led them to ask whether the Duke was deserting jazz, study and theorising about these performances of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* has led me to conclude that on the contrary, the distinction between classical and jazz music narrowed, and classical music met the Duke.

Notes

1. In this paper, the term 'classical' is taken to mean critical values and musical techniques from the Baroque, Classical and Romantic periods.

2. Long is particularly relevant to this study for his experience of Duke Ellington's repertoire, for he also leads the Ellington repertoire band Echoes of Ellington.

3. All musical examples are transcribed by the author.

4. This thesis is supported by the identification of thematic unity in the improvisations of Sonny Rollins and Charlie Parker in Schuller (1999: 86–97) and Owens (1974) respectively.

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