

“It Don’t Mean a Thing if It Ain’t Got That Grundgestalt!”— Ellington from a Motivic Perspective

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What is it that makes Ellington’s music so enduringly strong? One school of thought—the predominant school—highlights his technical mastery of orchestration and harmony. The sonorities are so striking, so right, so unique, that they seem in a category all their own. Billy Strayhorn came up with a phrase to describe it: “The Ellington Effect.”¹ And André Previn was quoted as saying:

You know, Stan Kenton can stand in front of a thousand fiddles and a thousand brass and make a dramatic gesture and every studio arranger can nod his head and say, “Oh, yes, that’s done like this.” But Duke merely lifts his finger, three horns make a sound, and I don’t know what it is!²

In this essay, I suggest the value of turning our analytic attention elsewhere—away from these timbral and harmonic wonders towards Ellington’s motivic procedures.³ For while he has rightly received high praise for the first, more “sensual” aspect of his art,⁴ the second aspect—the motivic—has been far less deeply explored. In fact, the claim that Ellington was a master miniaturist who lacked the ability to construct coherent larger forms has become commonplace. And it is a pity, for in Ellington’s motivic procedures (including such procedures in many of his extended compositions) there lies an even richer vein of evidence for the power and sophistication of his compositional imagination. The evidence can be summarized this way: in many of Duke Ellington’s best scores there is a subtlety of tonal organization, an ability to have an entire work grow (or appear to grow) from a core musical statement—or, rather, a “Grundgestalt.” This German term, coined by Arnold Schoenberg, is rarely encountered in jazz scholarship; certainly it lags behind various Schenkerian theoretical concepts, equally European in origin, which nevertheless have been

¹ Billy Strayhorn, “The Ellington Effect,” *Down Beat*, November 5, 1952, 2; reprinted in *The Duke Ellington Reader*, ed. Mark Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 269–270.

² Ralph J. Gleason, “Duke Excites, Mystifies Without Any Pretension,” *Down Beat*, November 5, 1952, 18.

³ The first study dealing in depth with motivic integration in Ellington was Brian Priestley and Alan Cohen, “Black, Brown & Beige,” *Composer* 51 (Spring 1974), 33–37, 52 (Summer 1974), 29–32, and 53 (Winter 1974–1975), 29–32; reprinted in *Duke Ellington Reader*, 185–204.

⁴ A famous instance can be found in Gunther Schuller’s essay “Ellington in the Pantheon,” in which Schuller asserts that “Ellington’s imagination was most fertile in the realm of harmony and timbre.” Gunther Schuller, “Duke Ellington in the Pantheon,” *High Fidelity*, November 1974, 63; reprinted in Gunther Schuller, *Musings: The Musical Worlds of Gunther Schuller* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 47–50.

taken up in jazz theory—in our classrooms, journal essays, and doctoral dissertations. Yet in my estimation, Grundgestalt is an idea which has greater potential to clarify what is actually happening in jazz, for Grundgestalt theorists conceive the process of musical composition as inherently improvisational.

It is a methodological point of honor among these theorists to approach every individual composition as unique—a structured improvisation on its own distinctive motivic idea, its own “basic shape.” Unlike the Schenkerians, who imply that musicians are *not* conscious of the underlying basic shape they are working with (the *Ursatz*), Grundgestalt analysts grant that a composer may be conscious of his or her “basic motif” even as there will also be an impulsion to make use of it in a more subconscious manner. Again, the fit with jazz is a natural one; for from everything we know of jazz composition (and, in particular, Ellington’s creative procedures), it is precisely this interplay of mind at its most sharply conscious and mind in touch with varying levels of subconscious spontaneity that characterizes the creative act.⁵ Ellington himself was witheringly critical of those unable to see this. In a 1958 essay titled “The Future of Jazz,” he wrote that

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 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.⁶

Turning directly to statements from some of the more celebrated Grundgestalt theorists, we see clearly their emphasis on the unique “idea” and the ever-fresh unfolding of its potential through acts of improvisation. We begin with Schoenberg and his 1947 essay “Brahms, the Progressive.” Here Schoenberg declares that “composing is a slowed-down improvisation,” and he further notes that a true craftsman is proud “of the flexibility of his mind, of his subtle sense of balance, of his never-failing logic, of the multitude of variations, and last but not least of the profundity of his idea and his capacity of penetrating to the most remote consequences of an idea.”⁷ Analysts who followed Schoenberg’s lead were similarly impelled to accent the improvisational nature of musical composition. Rudolf Reti, in the midst of a passage discussing the process of thematic integration in Beethoven’s “Kreutzer” sonata, makes the following assertion, and puts it boldly in italics: “*musical form is brought about through an improvisational, almost psychological process rather than according to any traditional concept or formula.*”⁸

⁵ Perhaps it is this very junction of mind as conscious and sub-conscious that makes for the ecstasy of jazz experience. For the division in most contemporary lives between the primal and the sophisticated, the impulsive and the learned, is very steep—and here the division is overcome.

⁶ Quoted in Ken Rattenbury, *Duke Ellington: Jazz Composer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 14.

⁷ Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 439.

⁸ Rudolf Reti, *Thematic Patterns in Sonatas of Beethoven*, ed. Deryck Cooke (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 153. See also Rudolf Reti, *The Thematic Process in Music* (New York: Macmillan, 1951).

The Grundgestalt concept asserts that cohesion and unity may be achieved in a piece of music through the constant reinterpretation of a central (and usually quite compact) motivic idea.⁹ This is a technical matter; yet philosophic (even theological) implications are present. Let us remember that Ellington was a man of devout and largely traditional religious feeling. In the text for his first “confession of faith,” the 1965 *Concert of Sacred Music*, he asserted upfront his belief in the ultimate unity of reality in this work’s opening movement, “In the Beginning, God.” Similarly, for the *Second Sacred Concert* (of 1968), the first words we encounter (for “Supreme Being”) emphasize the oneness of God. After this, in keeping with the Biblical account, Ellington continues with a presentation of how the universe, in all its diversity and contrast, emerged from that sacred unity. The parallels to the techniques of motivic composition are obvious.

Beethoven and Ellington in Agreement

Schoenberg saw the Grundgestalt as a motivic idea with enough inherent musical power to animate an entire composition. In Schoenberg’s conception of this term, the “organic musical growth” of the Grundgestalt idea largely differed from what we ordinarily think of as “motivic development.” There is less reliance on techniques of simple sequence and fragmentation; instead, a nuanced and flexible understanding of how one musical shape (Gestalt) can, with unlimited elasticity, evolve from another—how a later shape can seem in its immediate sonic configuration to be entirely different from an earlier one and yet share with it what might be called a common “musical DNA.” This relation is something like that of a butterfly and a caterpillar or a frog and a tadpole.

Consider one such transformation, which Schoenberg pointed to in his 1947 essay “Folkloric Symphonies.”¹⁰ In the opening movement of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, figure (b) emerges from figure (a) through a conjoint process of retaining its essential shape, and yet expanding certain intervals while also retaining certain pitches (Eb and F) from the initial motif. Figure (c) then emerges as an ornamented form of “b”:

This example offers an instance of contiguous motivic transformation; in a “step-by-step” manner we follow the logic by which Beethoven gets from his vehement initial motto to this lyrically contrasting idea. Yet there is nothing in Grundgestalt theory that requires a composer to present his logic so smoothly or directly. A transformation of a core motif may equally well burst on the scene suddenly without immediately “explaining itself.”¹¹

Ellington makes use of both of the procedures I have just described. From his 1966 *Far East Suite*, for example, the principal themes for movements six (“Blue Pepper:

⁹ Jazz scholars and analysts working along lines parallel to “Grundgestalt” theory, without invoking the term specifically, include Gunther Schuller and Barry Kernfeld, both of whom have written keenly about the use of fundamental “cells” as a basis for extended improvisation.

¹⁰ Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, 161–166, and especially 164.

¹¹ “Schoenberg was deeply interested in such ‘remote’ relationships,” write Patricia Carpenter and Severine Neff, in their “Commentary” to Schoenberg’s *The Musical Idea, and the Logic, Technique, and Art of Its Presentation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 39.

London—and it was quite possibly composed in the closing months of 1963.¹³ Ellington’s “Tourist Point of View,” by contrast, was first recorded nearly three years later, on December 21, 1966.¹⁴ Yet—and I emphasize this point—such chronological information does not change the underlying technical situation. As a work gets shaped, composers (or, in this case, “joint composers”) often shift material back and forth, and design “later” material so that it will cohere with what is already “at hand.” Rather than having the figures of Strayhorn emerge as transformations of Ellington, if it occurred the other way around, so be it. Ellington “simplifying” Strayhorn is just as motivic a procedure as Strayhorn (and Hamilton) “ornamenting” Ellington.¹⁵

Jazz and the Abstract Truth

And now it is time to “pull the camera back” and consider all these technical matters—“close-ups,” so to speak—in a wider-perspective: a philosophic perspective. Schoenberg called the multitudinous new forms which emerge through the free use of a composer’s imagination “developing variations,”¹⁶ and he carefully differentiated this concept from those aspects of musical growth that he considered more “mechanical,” such as simple sequencing. These latter techniques, by analogy, were seen as something akin to inorganic procedures, such as the growth of a crystal. Lacking organic impulsion, such mechanical forms of musical extension and continuity lacked, in his view, adequate richness, surprise, and flexibility—i.e., less life, or—if one prefers—less soul.

One can observe throughout Schoenberg’s writings that he judged a composer’s quality by a standard which we in the world of jazz easily recognize: the standard of never saying the same thing twice.¹⁷ A question arises: is this “standard” merely a stylistic convention, or does it go deeper than that? Does it have philosophic implications? Does it have something to do with the degree of truth which we sense as we listen to the music?

¹³ For information on the February 15, 1964, recording, see W. E. Timner, *Ellingtonia: The Recorded Music of Duke Ellington and His Sidemen*, 4th ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 240–241.

¹⁴ This December 21 recording date is provided in the liner notes to the Bluebird/RCA/BMG compact disc of Ellington, *The Far East Suite, Special Mix*. Presumably this date is taken from the Bluebird recording session logs. That said, Timner suggests this recording was made on December 19 (see Timner, *Ellingtonia*, 295).

¹⁵ Two movements were likely first conceived independent of the suite: Strayhorn’s “Isfahan,” recorded as “Elf” on July 18, 1963; and “Ad Lib on Nippon” (largely Duke’s, but with a contribution from Jimmy Hamilton), recorded as “Igo” on August 20, 1964, and first released as part of *Suite for Swinging*. As I have indicated elsewhere (Edward Green, “What Gives Musical Theatre *Musical Integrity?*,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 21, no. 1 [Fall 2006]: 75–93) composers who “import” material into a work often do so with an awareness that something in that “alien” music will allow it to be successfully integrated with the composition at hand. That “something” is often a set of shared motivic relations.

¹⁶ While not using the term “developing variations,” in his *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), Paul Berliner often appears to be describing this phenomenon.

¹⁷ In “New Music: My Music” (written ca. 1930), Schoenberg says simply: “To lay claim to one’s interest, a thing must be worth saying, and must not yet have been said.” Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, 102.

One of the most powerful arguments on behalf of the method of compositional analysis being explored in this essay was made by the British musicologist (and psychoanalyst) Hans Keller, who was a close associate of Rudolf Reti. We can use Keller's words as a starting point in examining the issue of "truth" in music, and more specifically "truth" in jazz. I quote from a Keller 1956 essay on Mozart's chamber music. The argument presented here is not limited to Mozart alone—this argument is much broader, and deals with the fundamental aesthetics of unity and variety. In a characteristically feisty, "take-no-prisoners" fashion, Keller notes:

What usually goes by the name of analysis is nothing of the sort. Most critics have never grasped the essential difference between analysis and description. Description gives a verbal account of what you hear and is essentially unnecessary. Can anyone seriously suggest that a music-lover has to be told that a contrasting theme is a contrasting theme?

Verbal or symbolic analysis shows, on the other hand, the elements of what you hear. In a great piece, these are always the elements of unity, not of diversity, because a great piece grows from an all-embracing idea. Great music diversifies a unity; mere good music unites diverse elements. As soon as you have analyzed the unity of a great work, its variety explains itself, whereas when you describe its, or indeed any work's, diversity, nothing is explained at all.¹⁸

An eager (and expert) controversialist, Keller draws a very sharp line in the sand. Too sharp, I believe—for what really matters is not whether a composer begins with unity and finds a way to exfoliate it, or whether his beginning point is a sense of rich diversity and then he uses his imagination to probe deeply into that diversity and discover a unity operating within it. The crucial point is that both of these equally important aesthetic values must be honored. They are opposites, and they must be made one.

As the great American poet and critic Eli Siegel¹⁹ powerfully observed, there is an unconscious aesthetic criterion which is present in the life of every person. "The resolution of conflict in self," he explained, "is like the making one of opposites in art."²⁰ That statement is a central principle in the philosophy he founded in 1941, Aesthetic Realism—a way of seeing the world as a whole, which deals in a fresh (and rigorous) manner with the age-old question of art and truth.

¹⁸ Hans Keller, "The Chamber Music," in *The Mozart Companion*, eds. H.C. Robbins Landon and Donald Mitchell (New York: W. W. Norton, 1956), 90–91.

¹⁹ See Deborah A. Straub's entry for Eli Siegel (1902–1978) in *Contemporary Authors*, vol. 9, *New Revision Series* (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1983), 453–455.

²⁰ Cited in Martha Baird, *Two Aesthetic Realism Papers* (New York: Definition Press, 1971), page v. After being awarded *The Nation's* esteemed prize for poetry in 1925, Eli Siegel moved from Baltimore to New York and was active in jazz circles. In 1935, he became the first coordinator of jazz and poetry events at the Village Vanguard. At the same time, he also retained his Baltimore connections. It was in this context that Ellington and Siegel apparently interacted on occasion; as Dr. James Crockett of the Eubie Blake National Jazz Institute has told me, he recalls seeing Ellington and Siegel in conversation together backstage after various performances of the band in Baltimore in the 1930s.

As I hope has been apparent in the early pages of this essay, Duke Ellington's motivic techniques depend on the simultaneity of opposites: of unity and diversity; of sameness and difference; of something remaining firmly itself while also being utterly flexible. From the perspective of Aesthetic Realism, these technical matters have a life significance which goes beyond mere matters of craftsmanship. The bedrock idea of Siegel's philosophy is that there is no fundamental difference between the structure of reality and the structure of beauty—hence the name, Aesthetic Realism. Moreover, as I have already indicated, he taught that the very nature of self is aesthetic. "The world, art, and self explain each other," he stated; "each is the aesthetic oneness of opposites."²¹ And in a 1955 essay "Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?" he asked this question: "Is there in every work of art something which shows reality as one and also something which shows reality as many and diverse?—must every work of art have a simultaneous presence of oneness and manyness, unity and variety?"²² My essay proceeds on the belief that the answer is "Yes."

Just as a person cannot be satisfied with his or her life unless that life has *both* integrity and variety, unity and adventure, so a composer (or a listener) cannot be deeply satisfied with music which fails to bring coherence to its (inevitable) opposing aspects.²³ Nor is the reason for this dissatisfaction "psychological" in the narrowly clinical sense of the word—which is where many otherwise quite estimable critics of music, such as Hans Keller, fall short. They sense the presence of opposites in music,

²¹ Cited in Edward Green, "A Note on Two Conceptions of Aesthetic Realism," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 45, no. 4 (October 2005): 438. See also Edward Green, "Donald Francis Tovey, Aesthetic Realism, and the Need for a Philosophic Musicology," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 36, no. 2 (December 2005): 127–148; and a presentation I co-authored with anthropologist Arnold Perey, "Aesthetic Realism: A New Foundation for Interdisciplinary Musicology," published in the accompanying CD-ROM to the *Proceedings of the Conference on Interdisciplinary Musicology*, eds. R. Parncutt, A. Kessler, and F. Zimmer (Graz, Austria: Khil and ESCOM, 2004).

²² Eli Siegel, "Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 14, no. 2 (1955): 282.

²³ For the relevance of this concept to African American experience in life and art, consider some representative statements contained in the Columbia College journal *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry*, which is devoted to the study of African American expressive arts. In vol. 1 (1995), Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. (1995, 5), calls for a "transdisciplinary discourse" that will go beyond "conceptual dichotomies." Similarly, in the same issue, George Brandon (1995, 49) writes of the attempt by artists to "synthesize" conflicts. Brenda Dixon Gottschild (1995, 51) insists on the need to "formulate theories that ... embrace opposites." Sterling Stuckey (1995, 75) writes: "Seeming opposition is the root of the quality of art that nourishes sacred and 'secular' needs, joining them in a single conception." After citing Frederick Douglass, Stuckey (*ibid.*) additionally notes: "Such is the constitution of the human mind, that, when pressed to extremes, it often avails itself of the most opposite methods." In vol. 2 of *Lenox Avenue* (1996), Rex M. Nettleford (1996, 29), after excoriating "binary constructs" (the cause, he says, of "numerous onslaughts against human sense and sensibility"), continues: "Black expressive arts ... have never been simply one or the other. Rather, they are frequently the dynamic manifestations of the dialectical reality that shapes the creative coexistence, by way of organic interaction, between such perceived designations." And in vol. 4 (1998), Samuel A. Floyd (1998, 62) remarks: "Any artwork and any description of it must necessarily be indirect, metaphorical, and paradoxical"—paradox being another way of speaking of opposites. These statements are representative of a vast body of scholarly insight supporting the value of Aesthetic Realism as universal critical methodology.

but do not fully grasp the significance of that fact.²⁴ And the significance is proudly philosophic: we are impelled to put opposites together in ourselves because we are after the truth about reality, and we want that truth reflected in our lives.²⁵

One of the permanent, ontological situations of reality is the oneness of change and sameness. Reality is changing all the time, and yet remains coherent. It is not, after all, a verbal accident that we call it a “universe” and not a “multiverse.” Art reflects this truth. As Aesthetic Realism sees it, all successful music is a oneness of change and stability; diversity and unity; coherence and surprise. Art embodies philosophic honesty.

It is important, at this juncture, to be pellucidly clear: there is absolutely no reason that musical coherence has to take on “European” characteristics or be achieved along technical lines that were developed on that continent. While this essay deals with motivic composition, that method of organizing music is only one of the many means by which unity and variety may be technically reconciled in music—and specifically in jazz. As Stefano Zenni ably showed, Ellington also made critical and cunning use of narrative, even “ritualistic” techniques as he designed his suites.²⁶ My thesis is simply that there was a greater (and more important) use by Ellington of motivic composition than has been recognized. And let us not set up warring dichotomies, including those between the African roots of jazz and its European roots—for Ellington respected both and was nourished by both.

There is no reason to think that a composer of his depth could not work on many levels at once: motivic, ritualistic, programmatic, and discursive. And he could clearly enjoy coordinating these levels. Still, the fact remains that when Ellington “thought in jazz” (to riff a bit on the title of Paul Berliner’s 1994 book²⁷), he did so again and again in a bewitchingly subtle motivic manner. To give more evidence for this, I focus now on three pieces, each from a different era in Ellington’s creative life.²⁸ First, I will consider the celebrated *Ko-Ko* from 1940, a year that included, among other masterpieces, *Jack the Bear*, *Harlem Airshaft*, and *Cottontail*. My second study is centered on *The Mooche* of 1928 (the most common spelling of this work includes a final “e,” though the composition’s copyright title is “The Mooch.” Unlike *Ko-Ko*, which is largely through-composed, the earlier composition contains a significant

²⁴ The idea that jazz illustrates the “oneness of opposites” can be found, in the work of Gunther Schuller, Martin Williams, and Wynton Marsalis—and implicitly in the writings of many other scholars and critics. The idea has also frequently been expressed in nearly synonymous terms: “unifying polarities,” “overcoming binary thinking,” “reconciling contraries,” etc.

²⁵ In *Aesthetic Realism: Three Instances* ([New York: Definition Press, 1961], 1), Eli Siegel gives another formulation of this key philosophic idea: “In reality opposites are one; art shows this.” Perhaps his major work on this theme is *The Aesthetic Nature of the World*. The book is not yet published; the manuscript reposes at the Aesthetic Realism Foundation in New York.

²⁶ Stefano Zenni, “The Aesthetics of Duke Ellington’s Suites: The Case of *Togo Brava*,” *Black Music Research Journal* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 1–28.

²⁷ Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*.

²⁸ I have given similar in-depth analyses elsewhere. See Edward Green, “Ellington and the Art of Motivic Composition,” in which I discuss *Harlem Airshaft* and *It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)*. *Ongakgaku: Journal of the Musicological Society of Japan* 53, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 1–18.

degree of improvisation on the part of Ellington's players. I study this work not only to indicate how early Ellington's keen "motivic consciousness" existed, but also because analysis reveals that the improvisations by his players were guided (however subconsciously) by an allegiance to a "core musical motif." Third, I continue to look at the *Far East Suite* in order to explore how Ellington (working with Strayhorn) made use of "developing variations" in his suites as a means of endowing these richly variegated works with enough underlying motivic unity to prevent them from devolving into a desultory kind of medley.²⁹

I chose *Far East Suite* advisedly. It would have been easy to select a suite that "foregrounds" its motivic unity (e.g., the *Liberian Suite* of 1947, or *Idiom '59*, or the *Goutelas Suite* of 1971, about which Stanley Crouch noted "the whole of which is built upon the opening fanfare"³⁰). But *Far East Suite* has not been seen this way. For example, in his important 2001 article on the suites, Stefano Zenni considered this suite (wrongly, I believe) to be without significant motivic connections. What makes *Far East Suite* particularly challenging to a Grundgestalt analyst is its compositional history. It was assembled over a number of years, was the work of two different composers (three, if one considers Jimmy Hamilton's contribution to "Ad Lib on Nippon"), and contains several movements originally conceived as independent, free-standing pieces. Nevertheless, as I hope to show, motivic unity is present in this work—and fascinatingly so.

***Ko-Ko*; or, The Anatomy of a Masterpiece**

As recorded on March 6, 1940, *Ko-Ko* has an outwardly simple structure.³¹ Set in Eb minor, it displays almost constant modal coloration.³² The arrangement consists of seven blues choruses preceded by an eight-bar introduction, and it concludes with a recapitulation of the intro plus a four-bar tag. Its core generative idea is presented in the opening measures. There is a rhythm and an interval. The rhythmic cell is the one that Beethoven explores in the Fifth Symphony, three eighth notes rushing towards an accented downbeat. As Ken Rattenbury points out in his own analysis of *Ko-Ko*, "this dominating ostinato rhythm is woven into the phrasing in every section of the piece."³³ The intervallic cell is the minor 7th. We meet this interval as the opening Eb on the low bari sax and string bass is followed by the Db entry of the lead trombone. (See Example 5.)

²⁹ How this might have implications for life, I leave for each reader of this essay to ponder—for we can ask: would a life, beautifully lived, have both integrity and diversity? Rich experience and a core allegiance to something firmly believed in?

³⁰ Stanley Crouch, *Considering Genius: Writings on Jazz* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 152. Crouch's original essay, "Duke Ellington: Transcontinental Swing," appeared in 1998.

³¹ Duke Ellington and His Orchestra, *Ko-Ko*, Victor 26536, 1940, 78 rpm; reissued on Duke Ellington, *The Early Forties Recordings (1940–1942)*, disc 8, *The Duke Ellington Centennial Edition: The Complete RCA/Victor Recordings (1927–1973)*, RCA/BMG 63386, 1999, compact disc.

³² The mode alternates. Fundamentally it is Eb Dorian, yet when the IV chord (Ab minor) prevails, Ellington accommodates the Cb.

³³ Rattenbury, *Duke Ellington*, 105.

The image displays three musical components. At the top is a lead trombone line in bass clef, 4/4 time, with a key signature of three flats. It features a descending melodic line with two intervals circled and labeled: a minor seventh (mi7) and a minor third (mi3). Below this is a 'Tom-Tom' rhythm line, also in bass clef and 4/4 time, showing a pattern of eighth notes marked with 'x'. To the right is a 'Basic Contour' diagram in bass clef, showing a descending line from Bb to Ab, with the intervals mi7 and mi3 explicitly labeled above the notes.

Example 5. Motivic cells in Duke Ellington's *Ko-Ko*.

Subsidiary to this primary intervallic cell is another: the minor third, outlined by the first phrase of the lead trombone, and as the piece proceeds. These two cells are nearly always conjoined.

To an astonishing degree this one rhythmic and these two intervallic cells organize the entire composition.³⁴ In the introduction, each of the lead trombone's phrases outlines a descending minor third. (The phrases are harmonized in a striking fashion: pure parallel triads.) Meanwhile, the overall outline of this melody is the minor seventh: Bb to Ab. Then, for the first "blues chorus," Juan Tizol plays a riff (see Example 6) also bounded by Bb and Ab, only an octave lower,³⁵ to which is appended the subsidiary interval of the minor third: Gb to Eb.

After Tizol's call, we get a reed response—yet another configuration of the core idea: the lead alto rises a minor third, Bb to Db, then falls a minor seventh to a low Eb. This is a transposed retrograde of Tizol's riff. And notice: at the point of contact between Tizol's trombone and the lead alto, the interval is also a minor seventh: Eb to Db. This particular minor seventh "boundary interval" is critical to the character of *Ko-Ko*. Not only did it mark the first interval we experienced, it will also mark the boundary of the work's final chord: from the low bari sax Eb to the high clarinet Db.

³⁴ I am indebted to David Berger for providing me with an excellent transcription of *Ko-Ko* (this is a copy of a 1988 handwritten transcription score that is distinct from Berger's various published transcriptions of this work). Though there are no extant full or short scores of *Ko-Ko* in Ellington's hand, there are two distinct sets of individual instrumental charts for Ellington's musicians. The earliest set, which dates to the original performance, only includes parts for six of Ellington's musicians. Of these, only one—the "2nd Tenor" part that was played by Ben Webster—is in Ellington's hand, while the other parts are in the hand of the same copyist. This second tenor score is remarkable, for Ellington hardly ever did parts. (As in this case, prior to hiring Tom Whaley as a full-time copyist in 1941, Ellington assigned various band members to extract the individual parts from his short scores.) One possible explanation for this one instance of a part in Ellington's hand is that Webster had joined the band (around December 1939)—thereby expanding the orchestra's sax section from four to five parts—after the composer had already written *Ko-Ko* (which was recorded in March 1940). Thus, this Webster part is, unlike the other charts, not a copyist's "extraction," but a further act of composition because Ellington needed to add a fifth sax part that was present neither in the original short score (now lost) nor in the first set of parts.

³⁵ The third saxophone "response" is transposed up a fourth. Nevertheless, it retains the basic motivic shape: up a minor third, Eb to Gb, and then down a minor seventh to Ab.

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The image shows a piano accompaniment in 4/4 time, key of B-flat major. The right hand has a melodic line with notes G4, A4, Bb4, and C5. Above the first two notes are labels 'mi3' and 'mi7'. The left hand has a bass line with notes G2, F2, and E2. Above the first two notes are labels 'Tizol mi7' and 'mi3'. A circle highlights the first two notes of the right hand, with an arrow pointing to a callout box. The callout box contains two examples: '[Ex. 1]' showing the notes G4 and A4, and '[Ex. 2]' showing the notes Bb4 and C5, with the text '(Retrograde of Ex. 1)' below it.

Example 6. Transformation of the Grundgestalt in *Ko-Ko*.

(See Example 7.) As “boundary” notes, Eb and Db serve as that chord’s outline; yet they also serve as the generators of its content—for the chord is comprised of an Eb minor triad below, mainly of brass, and a Db major triad above, exclusively of reeds.

The image shows a musical score for brass and saxophones in 4/4 time, key of B-flat major. The brass part is in the bass clef and has a sustained chord of Eb major. The saxophone part is in the treble clef and has a sustained chord of Db major. Labels include '(Db)' above the brass part, 'Cl. Alto Sax.' and 'Ten.' above the saxophone part, and 'Bari/Cb' below the bass clef.

Example 7. The final chord in Ellington’s *Ko-Ko*.

Let us now consider the ostinati at the center of *Ko-Ko*. A sax ostinato accompanies Joe “Tricky Sam” Nanton’s trombone solo in choruses two and three; another underlies Ellington’s astonishing piano solo in chorus four. This latter passage is followed by a trumpet ostinato for chorus five. If we observe the sustained (and metrically accented) notes in these ostinati, a remarkable fact emerges: they outline a Db major triad. (See Example 8.)

The image shows three staves of musical notation, each representing a different chorus. The first staff is labeled 'Chorus II / III' and has a sustained note Ab. The second staff is labeled 'Chorus IV' and has a sustained note Db. The third staff is labeled 'Chorus V' and has a sustained note F. A large oval encircles the notes Ab, Db, and F across the three staves, indicating they form a Db major triad. Each staff ends with '(etc.)'.

Example 8. Ostinati in *Ko-Ko*.

Within an unchanging Eb minor tonality, Ellington has found a structural way to highlight the triad of Db major. This is a very subtle expression of the primary intervallic cell from which *Ko-Ko* emerges. We have here an almost perfect exemplification of what Schoenberg meant when he wrote in “Brahms: The Progressive”:

The most important capacity of a composer is to cast a glance into the most remote future of his themes or motives. He has to be able to know beforehand the consequences which derive from the problems existing in his material, and to organize everything accordingly. Whether he does this consciously or subconsciously is a subordinate matter. It suffices if the result proves it.³⁶

One other point: these background ostinati also express the composition’s central rhythmic motif. In choruses two and three, that rhythmic figure is heard—as it was in the introduction—every two measures (from 0:31 to 1:06).³⁷ Chorus four, however, presents this rhythmic figure in a stretto that has been achieved by repeating the motif every measure (from 1:07 to 1:22). Beginning in the last measure of chorus five, and continuing into chorus six, Ellington ratchets up the repetition rate of the stretto, as the band repeats that rhythmic cell every half measure. As a result, we have the sort of “pyramid” design that is seen so frequently in later big-band jazz—but at this time (1940), such a design was still relatively rare. (Or, more exactly, there are three stages to the stretto here since the band is trading twos with Blanton from 1:43 to 2:00.) This highly concentrated rhythmic stretto can also be heard in the four-bar “tag” which concludes the composition.

It is clear that Ellington, like Schoenberg, enjoyed both working with compact musical ideas and discovering the potential in such materials for nearly unlimited variation. The striking fact is that unlike his Austrian counterpart, the American bandleader largely came to “motivic composition” independent of the influence of earlier European models,³⁸ discovering on his own the advantages of this approach to organizing musical form.³⁹ Thus, the “Ellington Effect” and the “Schoenberg Sound” appear, on the surface, as different as can be. By contrast, the “riff-like” procedures found in the early works of Schoenberg’s most noted contemporary (and rival), Igor

³⁶ Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, 422.

³⁷ All track timings in this essay are coordinated with the reissue compact discs that I have listed in my citations. That said, the timings of most digital reissues of these tracks should conform fairly closely to the timings that I have provided.

³⁸ On the other hand, that Ellington was early made aware of European music and some of its structural principles—at least to a certain extent—can be surmised from his study with Henry Grant and friendship with Will Marion Cook. Moreover, as Mark Tucker indicates in *Ellington: The Early Years* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995) the church music he heard as a child in Washington, DC, was to a significant degree “formal” [i.e., “European”] in nature. See, in particular, pages 22–27. In addition, his music classes in the public schools made substantial use of European models—a fact confirmed through conversations I have had with archivists of the Washington school system.

³⁹ Though it is outside the scope of this essay, one can surmise that a key source of this technique for Ellington was his deep engagement—in the mid and late 1930s, in particular—with the potential of the blues to provide just such a synthesis of unity and variation.

Stravinsky, can appear far more akin to Ellington's textures⁴⁰—and several jazz scholars have noted that kinship, including Constant Lambert in *Music, Ho!* (1931)⁴¹ and, more recently, Mervyn Cooke, in his “Jazz Among the Classics and the Case of Duke Ellington” essay in *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*.⁴² Still, when we dig beneath the surface, an equally, if not more compelling case can be made for the kinship between Schoenberg and Ellington: a case of parallel, but independent, evolution towards a largely similar understanding of how to go about motivic composition in an organic fashion.

Thrivin' on a Grundgestalt—The Prehistory of *Ko-Ko*

It seems *Ko-Ko* was “brewing” in Ellington's mind for quite some time.⁴³ There is evidence that at least three earlier compositions served as something like “sketches” for this later work. Let us begin with *Old King Dooji*, which was recorded on December 22, 1938.⁴⁴ On the surface, *Old King Dooji* appears quite different from *Ko-Ko*; it is not a blues and its tempo is significantly faster.⁴⁵ Yet this 1938 arrangement exhibits certain harmonic and melodic features which are hardly discernable in earlier Ellington, but will come to be centrally present in *Ko-Ko*. It begins with a piano

⁴⁰ Concerning the possible interaction of these two great composers, Mercer Ellington once remarked, “Stravinsky used to come by and sit and listen to the band from time to time in the Cotton Club days. They got to know each other pretty well.” Cited in Stuart Nicholson, *Reminiscing in Tempo: A Portrait of Duke Ellington* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999), 124. While there are difficulties here, this statement is not to be blithely dismissed; it may well contain a core of truth. Stravinsky's first visit to New York was in 1925, prior to the years in which the Ellington played at the Cotton Club and before Ellington's earliest significant recordings. It is thus unlikely (while not impossible) that Stravinsky met him then. The Russian composer returned for his second American tour in 1935. While Ellington was no longer at the Cotton Club, the orchestra did perform often in New York at that time, and he was by then a world-renowned figure. Stravinsky undoubtedly had heard of him; in fact, he was in Paris during Ellington's much publicized first visit there (July 27 to August 3, 1933). Stravinsky's third visit to the United States was in 1937—a visit which included the premiere of his *Jeu des Cartes* at the Metropolitan Opera, conducted by the composer, on April 27. (The Met was located on Broadway between 39th and 40th streets.) By this time, the Cotton Club was no longer in Harlem, but had re-opened at Broadway and 48th Street. Ellington's orchestra was featured in the Cotton Club's “Spring Show,” opening on March 17. It is quite possible that Mercer Ellington had this period in mind. Mercer, would have been a 19-year-old student at Juilliard, and keenly aware of the significance of these two masters meeting: one, at the pinnacle of the jazz world; the other, the very symbol of European modernism.

⁴¹ See “Constant Lambert on Ellington (1934),” in *Duke Ellington Reader*, 111.

⁴² Mervyn Cooke, “Jazz Among the Classics and the Case of Duke Ellington,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*, eds. Mervyn and David Horn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 153–73.

⁴³ *Ko-Ko* bears a relation to *Boola*, planned by Ellington as early as the mid-1930s. The prominent tomtoms of *Ko-Ko* may indicate that it (or some earlier version) was intended for the opera's opening. In the archives of the Smithsonian, there is a hand-written, 29-page scenario by Ellington which sets *Boola*'s opening scene—with tomtoms playing—in the African jungle. In his *Dvorák to Duke Ellington* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Maurice Peress articulates the relation of *Boola* to *Black, Brown & Beige* of 1943; the relation to *Ko-Ko*, however, is left unexplored by Peress.

⁴⁴ Duke Ellington and His Orchestra, *Old King Dooji*, Brunswick 8306, 1938, 78 rpm; reissued on Duke Ellington, disc 2 of *Prelude to a Kiss, 1938–1939*, in the series *The Duke: Edward Kennedy Ellington and His Orchestra*, History 20.4153–302, 1999, compact disc.

⁴⁵ In *Old King Dooji*, the tempo equals 203 bpm per quarter note. *Ko-Ko*'s quarter-note tempo equals 160 bpm.

introduction which, in its concentrated percussive fury, is new to Ellington, but notably resembles the raw and aggressive opening of *Ko-Ko*. In addition, quite early in the arrangement, the lead trumpet rises boldly from its tonic C up to Bb. (See Example 9.) Connecting that rise of a minor seventh to the sax figure that immediately follows, we hear prefigured the intervallic core of *Ko-Ko*.

Example 9. Trumpet figure early in *Old King Dooji*.

[The presence of this asserted trombone C makes the Bb → C relation *felt*, even as the last trumpet note is G.]

Example 10. Later passage from *Old King Dooji*.

About a half minute later, there is another passage highlighting the relation of C and Bb, now scored for brass, with reeds responding. (See Example 10.) Note the leap in the lead sax; such a “naked” melodic gesture, rising from the tonic to the flatted seventh, is almost unheard-of in earlier Ellington. It is, however, a staple in *Ko-Ko*. Immediately following this is a 16-bar passage featuring parallel triads in the trombones. They differ from those of *Ko-Ko*, but there are elements in common: chromatic slide-slips; a hint of bi-tonality; and a prominent melodic cadence of b7 falling to 5. (See Example 11.)

Finally, *Old King Dooji* concludes with a modal polychord: an F major triad superimposed on a tonic C minor triad. (See Example 12.) Again, this is unlike earlier Ellington compositions but very much in keeping with *Ko-Ko*.

When we turn to *Solid Old Man*, recorded three months later, on March 21, 1939,⁴⁶ we observe Ellington at work with the same material. The introduction to this number is a clear variation of the one for *Old King Dooji*. (See Example 13.) And it is notable that even as the key has shifted, the “absolute” pitches of *Dooji*'s Bb minor intro

⁴⁶ Duke Ellington and His Orchestra, *Solid Old Man*, Brunswick 8380, 1939, 78 rpm; reissued on Duke Ellington, disc 1, of *I'm Checkin' Out, Goom Bye, 1939*, in the series *The Duke: Edward Kennedy Ellington and His Orchestra*, History 20.4153–302, 1999, compact disc.

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Old King Doogie

Tbn. [Bmi/Cmi/ Eb+/Fmi/Bmi/Cmi/ Ab/ Fmi / Db /Bbmi / Bmi / Cmi/ Eb / Cmi / Fmi/ Gmi/ Bb / Bmi

Cb. g^{b-}

Koko

Tbn. $\overset{\Delta}{b7}$ $\overset{\Delta}{mi3}$ $\overset{\Delta}{5}$ $\overset{\Delta}{mi3}$

Gb / F / Fb / Ebmi / Abmi /Bmi / Bbmi / Ami / Abmi (etc.)

Cb. g^{b-}

Measures 1 & 2 repeat as bars 7 & 8; so the conclusion of the trombone melody accents $b7 \rightarrow 5$.

Example 11. Trombones in parallel triads: Ellington 1938 and 1940.

Tpt. $\overset{\Delta}{F}$ Clar. $\overset{\Delta}{Cmi}$

Tbn. Alto Sax. $\overset{\Delta}{Cmi}$

Bari/Cb. $\overset{\Delta}{Cmi}$

Resultant Polychord

Example 12. Final chord of *Old King Dooji*.

have been retained: Gb, F, and Bb. In these two works, we see an “evolution” towards *Ko-Ko*. The key has definitely darkened (from C minor to Bb minor), and the tempo has also slowed. We are not yet in *Ko-Ko*’s extremely dark Eb minor, but we are headed there; we are not yet at its still slower tempo, but we are approaching it.⁴⁷

[Old King Dooji]

[Solid Old Man]

[Col. 8vb]

Example 13. Ellington piano introductions.

⁴⁷ The quarter-note tempo in *Solid Old Man* equals 182 bpm. Again, *Ko-Ko*’s quarter equals 160 bpm.

The clearest sign that *Ko-Ko* is on the way is Nanton's solo in chorus three of *Solid Old Man*. This performance closely prefigures Nanton's solo in *Ko-Ko*—it hugs a high “dominant” with a tightly muted, growling plunger, and falls from this passage by means of a very similar melody and rhythm (1:29–1:40). In the coda, yet another sign of the “evolution” towards *Ko-Ko* can be observed. This passage likewise exhibits a minor 7th “boundary interval.” The high brass scream out a rising minor third (the 5th to the flatted 7th) and then the composition suddenly comes to an end on a low, unharmonized tonic. (See Example 14.) Again the primary intervallic cells of *Ko-Ko* are outlined; and again we are left with a distinct modal impression.

Example 14. The *Ko-Ko* Grundgestalt in *Solid Old Man* (1939).

An interesting sidelight on the relation of *Ko-Ko* and *Solid Old Man* is this: in *Ko-Ko* there is a saxophone melody (chorus seven) that does not seem to fit—it appears motivically “out-of-place.” Yet this passage can be heard as vestigial—as an “evolutionary hold-over”—and it plainly echoes certain elements from *Solid Old Man*. (See Example 15.)

Example 15. Vestigial remains of *Solid Old Man* in Ellington's *Ko-Ko*.

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The last piece in *Ko-Ko's* pre-history is *Delta Mood*,⁴⁸ recorded on December 21, 1938, just a day before *Old King Dooji*, and scored for a septet with Ellington himself as pianist. Like *Ko-Ko*, *Delta Mood* is written in Eb minor. Its brief piano introduction features sharply dissonant chords voiced à la Ellington's *Ko-Ko*. Moreover, the opening measures of Cootie Williams's melody outline an ascending minor 7th: Eb to Db, *Ko-Ko's* boundary interval. Most striking is the piano music linking the conclusion of Cootie's opening chorus to the saxophone music which follows. It is nearly identical to bars 9–12 of Ellington's solo chorus in *Ko-Ko*.

All this is internal, technical evidence for the prehistory of *Ko-Ko*. But external evidence can also be brought forth—for as soon as Ellington arrived at *Ko-Ko*, he seems to have had little desire to play the earlier works, and *Old King Dooji* in particular.⁴⁹ These pieces simply left the band's "book."

I have lingered with *Ko-Ko's* evolutionary history because it is fascinating in itself and intriguing in terms of the parallels it offers to the psychology of other motivically impelled composers—Beethoven, in particular. Both musicians would not leave a germinal idea alone until it had clarified itself and fully developed its potential.⁵⁰ With Beethoven, the evidence is largely in the sketchbooks. With Ellington, the evidence is often in the relation of a masterpiece to several of its predecessors—these serving, in effect, as "sketches." We know that Beethoven had aspects of the *Ninth Symphony* in his mind for years, even decades, before the music settled into its final form. Why could not a related process take place in Ellington over 15 months? Certainly it could. And, as we just saw, it did.

Do Nothin' Till You Hear the Minor Third

I turn now to *The Mooche*, and the famed recording of October 1, 1928.⁵¹ As is well-known, this work is actually a joint composition by Bubber Miley and Duke Ellington. Unfortunately, no hard musicological evidence exists to enable us to determine precisely who contributed what. The likeliest explanation, based on Bubber's playing style, is that Ellington thought of the initial clarinet trio idea, and Miley provided the "responses."⁵² However we parse the situation, what is *not*

⁴⁸ Cootie Williams and His Rug Cutters (a.k.a. Duke Ellington's orchestra), *Delta Mood*, Vocalion 4574, 1938, 78 rpm.

⁴⁹ It appears that this number was not performed live during the early 1940s.

⁵⁰ Similar evolutions exist for other 1940 masterpieces. For example, *The Jeep Is Jumpin'* (rec. August 24, 1938) plainly presages *Cottontail*. This helps to clarify a matter which has puzzled Ellingtonian aficionados and scholars: why, for a work featuring Ben Webster, did Ellington give a title referring to Johnny Hodges? Since *The Jeep Is Jumpin'* was co-composed with Hodges and nominally recorded by "Johnny Hodges and His Orchestra"—actually a septet of Ellington band members—the title *Cottontail* may thus be considered a gracious Ellingtonian "tip of the hat." Johnny Hodges and His Orchestra, *The Jeep Is Jumpin'*, Vocalion 4386, 1938, 78 rpm; reissued on Duke Ellington, disc 1, *Prelude to a Kiss, 1938–1939*, in the series *The Duke: Edward Kennedy Ellington and His Orchestra*, History 20.4153–302, 1999, compact disc.

⁵¹ Duke Ellington and His Orchestra, *The Mooche*, Okeh 8623, 1928, 78 rpm; reissued on Duke Ellington, *The Okeh Ellington*, Columbia C2K46177, 1991, compact disc.

⁵² Mark Tucker writes similarly about *Black and Tan Fantasy* and the interplay of Ellington and Miley in its creation. See Mark Tucker, *Ellington: The Early Years* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 242–247.

mysterious is the core musical concept. Put simply, it is the desire to highlight minor third relationships. And lest one say—“What is so special about the minor third? Isn’t it everywhere in jazz; blues-drenched as it is?”—I can only reply, wait and see! For what matters is not the *use* by a composer of a “commonplace” idea, but *how* he uses it. As Sy Oliver and Trummy Young put it: “T’ain’t what you do, it’s the way that you do it.”

So let us trace the “developmental” presence of the minor third in *The Mooche*. Right at the onset this interval is highlighted—in the fall of the lead clarinet: Eb to C. (See Example 16.) Continuing, this first melodic phrase comes to rest (end of m. 2) on F#. The melody so far has outlined a diminished triad (comprised, of course, of two minor thirds). Since Miley’s answer then rises from an F# to an A, before likewise taking a scalar descent down a tritone to D#, what emerges in the opening four measures is a perfect collection of symmetrical minor thirds.

The image shows a musical score for the opening of 'The Mooche'. It consists of two systems of music. The top system features a Clarinet (Cl.) part in the upper staff and a Plunger Trumpet (Tpt.) part in the lower staff. The Clarinet part begins with a diminished triad (Eb, Gb, Bb) and moves to F#. The Plunger Trumpet part starts with a melodic phrase (F#, A, D#, Bb) and includes a triplet. The bottom system features a piano accompaniment part in the upper staff and a plunger trumpet part in the lower staff. The piano accompaniment part includes a triplet and a 'mi3' marking. The plunger trumpet part includes a triplet. The score is in 4/4 time and C minor.

Example 16. Opening of *The Mooche*.

After sixteen measures focused on this material (in which the clarinet trio and Bubber’s plunger trumpet trade twos) there is an eight-bar extension in which the lead clarinet concentrates on what is—for the key of C minor—the most “bluesy” of minor third relations: Eb and Gb. (See Example 17.) The missing members of the

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diminished seventh (C and A) are provided by Bubber; they are the prominent outer tones of his answer.

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is in 4/4 time with a key signature of two flats (Bb, Eb). It features a clarinet (Cl.) line with a melodic line and a trumpet (Tpt.) line with a response. The bottom staff shows the clarinet line again, with a bracket indicating '[no Tpt. response]'.

Example 17. Measures 17–24 of *The Mooche*.

What happens next is, on the surface, a sharp contrast; suddenly we hear four open brass playing an Eb major blues. Ellington cunningly prepares us for this loud and assertive soli—and he prepares us to be both surprised and satisfied. Until this point, the composition has been a call and response between the clarinets in soli and Miley’s muted solo trumpet. But in the last four bars of the opening C minor section, there is no trumpet response. Technically, Bubber needs time to remove his mute. But that earthy necessity is transformed by Ellington into an organic, dramatic musical idea. We have gotten used to the play of brass following clarinet. But where is the brass? Ellington suspensefully delays the answer, and then gives it to us “full blast”—as if to say: “You were expecting brass? OK, here it is, and how!”

At the entry of this bright, powerful new sonority, Ellington creates his first major thematic transformation. It begins with a radical diminution of the main structural tones of the opening five measures of the earlier clarinet melody, accompanied by an ever-so-slight expansion of one of its intervals in order to accommodate the new diatonicism. Meanwhile, measures three and four of this passage are a memory (transposed and with milder diminution) of measures three and four of the opening of the composition: Bubber’s first “response” to the clarinets.⁵³ (See Example 18.)

That the young Ellington could make use of such radical diminution might seem unlikely. Yet an instance has already been heard—although we likely have to credit it to Bubber Miley. For if we return to the opening of *The Mooche*, we can see that Miley’s solo (mm. 7–8) is a two-bar, ornamented summary of the far longer clarinet melody that preceded it. (See Example 19.) And when that clarinet melody is repeated, Miley once again (though slightly differently) outlines its essential three-part design: a high Eb falling to a C, a low Eb falling to C, and some “action” in between focusing on the region between F and G. This neatly parallels the longer clarinet melody—for precisely in *its* middle we find exactly the same pitch region

⁵³ In that earlier figure, Bubber takes six beats to go from his initial F# to his concluding D#; in the later figure, the lead trumpet needs only three and half beats to present the transposed variation. This diminution is significantly milder than the previous instance, which outlines in less than two beats what originally took thirteen.

(m.25-28) X'
Tpt.

(m.3-4) 3
Bubber

(m.1-4) X
Cl.

Example 18. Motivic transformation in *The Mooche*.

Fundamental Outline

Motion around this region

mm. 1-8
8va X

mm. 7-8
3

mm. 15-16
3

Example 19. Bubber Miley's transformation of the opening clarinet melody of *The Mooche*.

emphasized, through the F# and G which are its most sustained notes. It is as if, by analogy, Bubber was giving each time a swift summation, in his own words, of what he had just heard another say before.

These may very well have been improvised solos, but they are structurally apt—and from our knowledge of Ellington’s work methods, especially early in his career, he and his soloists worked closely together in what can best be described as a form of “collective composition” parallel to, but also different from, the “collective improvisation” that characterized New Orleans jazz. In the Ellington band, solos were crafted simultaneously with the invention and development of thematic material. They were not, as they often became for so many other ensembles, simply moments for virtuosic display—variations on the “changes” rather than on the preceding *melodic* material. By the time Ellington composed complete works on his own (and by the mid-1930s this was largely the case), his players were so used to his way of thinking, and he so attuned to their favorite patterns of improvisation, that an integrity of composed and improvised music was maintained even as they only rarely thereafter engaged in extensive joint composition. The exception, of course, is found in the contributions of Ellington friend and writing partner, Billy Strayhorn.

Will Marion Cook

An important compositional influence on Ellington, one of the few people from whom we know for sure he took lessons, was Will Marion Cook, the noted African American musical theater composer. As is well-known, Cook was deeply educated in European music and its motivic and developmental traditions, and he also interacted with major European classical artists of his day, including both the Hungarian violinist Joseph Joachim and the famous Czech composer Antonín Dvořák.⁵⁴ In a long 1944 *New Yorker* interview-article (“The Hot Bach”) by Richard O. Boyer, Ellington describes part of his education with Cook: “I got most of my instruction riding around Central Park in a taxi ... [Cook] would give me lectures in music. I’d sing a melody in its simplest form and he’d stop me and say, ‘Reverse your figures.’”⁵⁵

Exactly what “reverse your figures” means needs investigation; Ellington nowhere returned to the phrase to clarify it, and precisely what he learned from Cook remains a tantalizing enigma. The best surmise is that Cook was advising Ellington to reconfigure sub-units of a master motif in order to develop it. This could mean reversing their order; it could mean techniques of melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, timbral, or dynamic inversion; it could mean changing the number of repetitions of sub-units relative to each other. All these possibilities are discernable in Ellington; tellingly, they are also observable in Cook.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ On Cook’s music and career, see especially Marva Griffin Carter, *The Life and Music of Will Marion Cook* (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1988), and Will Marion Cook, *The Music and Scripts of “In Dahomey,”* ed. Thomas L. Riis (Madison, WI: American Musicological Society, 1996).

⁵⁵ Quoted in Richard O. Boyer, “The Hot Bach” (orig. publ. 1944), in *Duke Ellington Reader*, 241. Interestingly, in Boyer’s essay (p. 221), Billy Strayhorn is also quoted using this phrase—so perhaps we can trace here a genealogy of compositional training: Dvořák to Cook to Ellington to Strayhorn.

⁵⁶ In her 1988 dissertation, Marva Griffin Carter notes Cook’s ability both at creating subtle, unifying melodic ties between the verse and chorus of a song (*The Life and Music of Will Marion Cook*, 198), as well as his ability to build an entire piece through the development of a pair of beginning motives (p. 220). Thomas Riis makes similar observations in *Just Before Jazz*.

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It's Allus De Same In Dixie

Piano

Example 22. Cellular rhythmic units in a song of Will Marion Cook.

From one point of view, such patterns were “coin of the realm” in popular song (both then and now). But the finesse with which Cook manages them is far from commonplace; and it is that finesse, that conjunction of simplicity and sophistication, which, I would argue, Ellington was most affected by in Cook.

Turning again directly to Ellington, we can see a playful reconfiguration of “sub figures” in the lead-up to the next section of *The Mooche*: a 12-bar Eb minor blues featuring a duet of clarinet and guitar. (See Example 23.) The E-flat major brass blues preceding it organized each of its four-bar units in miniature AAB form. Or, to be more precise, that is how the first two units are; the final unit (mm. 9–12) is different in that it delays the entrance of the B figure, making the transition to the minor blues which follows far more dramatic—in fact, something of a stretto, since the low register clarinet echoes that figure at a distance of just three beats.

b in stretto

Example 23. Measures 25–37 from Duke Ellington’s *The Mooche*.

Having arrived at the minor blues, we now have yet another organization of these miniature A and B units, and also a subtle structural cross-rhythm. Certainly, from a harmonic perspective, this blues can (and should) be heard in the prototypical division of three “four-bar” units. Yet, from a motivic perspective, it divides not in three parts, but in two—and asymmetrically at that. We begin with a seven-bar development of the B figure (itself a clear outgrowth of the minor third patterns of the opening of the piece) and follow with a 5-bar unit, which initially develops the A figure. (See Example 24.)

Example 24. Barney Bigard’s E-flat minor blues solo in *The Mooche*.

As with Miley’s remarkable solo interjections earlier, this chorus (featuring Bigard in chalumeau register) is also tightly motivic—and yet paradoxically feels utterly “free” as a solo moment. This paradox is encountered everywhere in the world of Ellington, for it is a truism that hardly any of his soloists, when they played outside the band, ever sounded as free, as uniquely themselves. I am suggesting that perhaps the reason has to do with the fact that these “Ellington” solos tend to have deep motivic substance.

Regarding the placement of this solo by Bigard, it is interesting to note the many ways in which—taken as a sonic whole—it constitutes a “reversed figure.” Earlier we met the clarinet timbre in an impingingly high tessitura; here it is correspondingly low. And where at first the composition featured clarinets in a group versus a solo brass instrument, the situation is now reversed: the brass are heard as a group, the clarinet as a solo. Finally, where the opening gave us clarinet first, and then brass (at a distance of two bars), here we get brass first and then clarinet (at a distance of a full blues chorus: twelve bars.)

Given the fact that *The Mooche* was very much a collective composition, born from a collaboration of two musicians (Miley and Ellington) and then added to through the spontaneous improvisations of several others, one might not expect it to have the same degree of structural tightness evinced by *Ko-Ko*. And perhaps it does not. (It is *early* Ellington, after all.) Yet even at its wildest moments—such as the completely unexpected scat solo by Baby Cox—we still hear an attempt at thematic integration, for her solo is largely a paraphrase of the ideas Miley sets out at the onset of the piece.

One last point: the over-arching tonal structure of *The Mooche* also highlights the interval of the minor third. The blues choruses which comprise its middle 48 measures alternate Eb major and minor, with the result that the composition is a large-scale expression of that interval: C minor / Eb (major and minor) / C minor. The first modulation is prepared. But the return modulation—from Eb minor to C

minor—is completely unprepared, and was one of the most daring things of its kind in early jazz.⁵⁸

Echoes of the Grundgestalt—or, the *Far East Suite*

With a work lasting approximately three-quarters of an hour, it is not possible to give anything approaching a complete analysis in a short essay such as this. Earlier, I indicated some of this work's motivic logic. The following analysis will further articulate the broad fabric of this work's rich motivic relations.

Example 25. Opening chords of “Tourist Point of View.”

Example 25 shows the four massive brass chords that, along with the groove created by John Lamb's bass and Rufus Jones's cymbals, are the first sounds we meet. What is remarkable about these dense chords is the way, ever-so-subtly nestled within, there is an alternating presence of the major and minor third — (with a bit of overlap in measure three). This semitonal “shake,” only implicit here, becomes crucially *explicit* later in the work; most overtly in the thematic material for “Amad” and “Agra,” the earliest movements Ellington composed for the suite.⁵⁹ (See Examples 26A and 26B.)

But these “Amad” and “Agra” themes appear roughly a half-hour later; we actually do not have to wait for this “hidden” idea to emerge; within measures this semitonal alternation is in clear focus—and comes to underpin the entire structure of “Tourist Point of View.” In mm. 1–96, Ellington constantly alternates the major and minor thirds above the tonic D. (For example, listen to the reed ostinati of mm. 17–28 [0:26–0:45], and mm. 37–69 [0:58–1:50].) The second section (mm. 97–158)

⁵⁸ In his book *Pioneers of Jazz*, Lawrence Gushee includes the score to “O You Sweet Rag,” a composition for violin and piano by James Palao. Lawrence Gushee, *Pioneers of Jazz: The Story of the Creole Band* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 35–37. In this composition, there is an unprepared (albeit brief) modulation from Eb minor to C minor. Interestingly, the song was published in Washington, DC, by the “song shark” H. Kirkus Dugdale in 1911, so it is conceivable that the adolescent Ellington was aware of it.

⁵⁹ Each was recorded on February 15, 1964, at a performance of the band at the Royal Festival Hall in London. See Timmer, *Ellingtonia*, 240–241. At this point, the suite, then titled *Impressions of the Far East*, consisted only of “Amad,” “Agra,” “Bluebird of Delhi,” and “Depk.” Two movements, “Taj Mahal” (a.k.a. “Agra”) and “Elf” (a.k.a. “Isfahan”), were also recorded at A&R Studios in New York a half-year earlier on July 18, 1963. *Ibid.*, 234.

A. *Amad*

B. *Agra*

Example 26. “Semitonal Shake” figure.

modulates to G, and in this new key again we meet alternating thirds in the background figures. (Listen, in particular, to mm. 117–158 [3:06–4:13]). The final section (beginning in m. 159 and fading out around m. 189) returns to D, and twice recapitulates the opening brass chords.

While this “semitonal shake” pervades the first movement, it also swiftly mutates into the “turn” figure I quoted earlier in Example 4, figure (a). This is the actual Grundgestalt of the composition, the “shake” being merely foreshadowing. Once established, this “turn” figure goes on to generate multitudinous variations across the entire breadth of the suite. Plainly, this figure is also significant in such moments as the “middle section” melodies from “Bluebird of Delhi,” “Depk,” and “Blue Pepper.” In addition, in “Tourist,” the structural alternation of minor and major third is still plainly visible in the first and third of these figures. (See Examples 27A–C.)

A. *Bluebird of Delhi*

B. *Depk*

C. *Blue Pepper*
(Eb bass)

Example 27. “Turn figure.”

The most subtle “turn” variant, perhaps, is the surprising series of root position chords which Ellington uses at the onset of “Mount Harissa,” the central movement of the suite: F#m — G — F#m — F7 — F#m. If Ellington ever used such a slow,

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semitonal “turn” as the underpinning of a critical harmonic progression elsewhere in his creative output, that use is unknown to me. This, in other words, is a very unique moment in Ellingtonia, yet one that emerged organically from motivic impulses. As Gunther Schuller observed in 1956:

“Form” need not be a confining mold into which the tonal materials are poured, but rather that the forming process can be *directly* related to the musical material employed in a specific instance. In other words, *form* evolves out of the material itself and is not imposed upon it. We must learn to think of form as a verb rather than a noun.⁶⁰

With this pivotal fifth movement of the suite in mind,⁶¹ let us return to the beginning of “Mount Harissa” and trace what has happened. For unlike pieces such as *Ko-Ko* or *The Mooche*, which, in their brevity, concentrate on the primal form of a Grundgestalt, a work of more generous proportions like *Far East Suite* will understandably require more flexibility, and will need to give its “basic shape” more room to evolve.

This is exactly the case in *Far East Suite*. From that initial semitonal shake, an expanded “turn”-like figure emerges in “Tourist Point of View” which—in its center—spans a perfect fifth (though spelled in Example 3 as a doubly diminished sixth: G# to Eb.) The figure is expanded still further in “Bluebird of Delhi” to stretch a minor seventh. (Again, see Example 3.) Beginning with “Isfahan,” the octave is achieved and this interval comes to outline nearly every composed-out melody that follows. For example, one can see Ellington teasingly playing with the octave (true and diminished) in the movement that follows, “Depk.” (See Example 28.) With its quirky chromatic sequences, this theme is a composed-out junction of the “turn” idea and the scale.

Example 28. Principle melody of “*Depk.*”

Returning to “Mount Harissa,” let us take an analytic look at the melody that Ellington places in counterpoint to his remarkable bass line. It begins with a set of

⁶⁰ Cited by Cooke in “Jazz Among the Classics,” 158.

⁶¹ This movement is harmonically pivotal as well. The suite begins with a tonal center of D and ends in Bb. F# is tonally equidistant from these poles. Moreover, the tonality of the *central* section of “Mount Harissa” is likewise equidistant, for C is a major second away from both D and Bb.

interlocking thirds that subtly remind us of the interlocking fourths of the aforementioned “comping” figure from “Tourist Point of View.” The melody then unfolds so as to complete a rising octave (F# to F#), after which we hear a series of “shakes” (now a full tone, rather than semitone) alternating with “turn” figures. That octave motion, plus the “shakes” and “turns,” is what the melody to the movement immediately following (“Blue Pepper”) also exhibits, only in inversion, and with the scalar motion through the octave more explicit. The same general design can be heard at the beginning of movement seven, “Agra,” as well as movement eight, “Amad.” Here, too, a descending octave is followed by a “shake” and then a “turn”-like figure—only in “Amad” we have the “shake” both as the tune begins and also in its midst.

The relation of the tight semitone and the wide octave is highlighted throughout the suite. It is key, for example, to the melodic outline of primary cell of “Isfahan” and to the melody for the middle section of “Mount Harissa”—which has the “Isfahan cell” both in its original form, and in its inversion. (See Examples 29A–C.) And Ellington’s intensely “reductionist” counterpoint to the solo by Gonsalves is largely a series of bare octaves, graced with a semitone on the bottom. And as one can plainly hear, we are still dealing with a structural semitonal “shake”—only now this is based on the minor and major 7th, rather than a 3rd.

Example 29 consists of three musical staves labeled A, B, and C.
 Staff A, titled "Isfahan", shows a melodic line in a key with three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and a 3/4 time signature. It features a triplet of eighth notes marked with a bracket and the letter "a".
 Staff B, titled "Mount Harissa", shows a more complex melodic line with various chords indicated above the staff, including $\overset{\wedge}{7}$, $\overset{\wedge}{\#6/b7}$, and $\overset{\wedge}{7}$. It also features a bracketed "a" over a triplet of eighth notes.
 Staff C, titled "(Piano)", shows a piano accompaniment with a bracketed "a (var.)" over a series of notes, including some with accidentals.

Example 29. Transformation of the “Isfahan” cell.

In this suite, everything seems to relate to everything else motivically, even as there is astonishing surface variety. And this “inter-echoing” structure of resemblances—what, in honor of the “Far East,” the Hindus in their deep and poetic way of expressing metaphysical truth call “The Net of Indra”⁶²—is achieved through an

⁶² See that exemplar of non-dualistic thought, the *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination* (*Vivka-Chudamani*) by Shankara (fl. 710) in a translation, and with scholarly introduction, by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood (Hollywood: Vedanta Press, 1947). A close parallel to the “Net of Indra” in Western philosophy would be the concept of Monadology in Leibniz. See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *The Monadology and Other Philosophical Writings*, trans. Robert Latta (London: Oxford University Press, 1898), 215–271.

evolution so gradual, so subtle, one might best compare it with procedures in late Beethoven or Wagner (also perhaps in the symphonies of Sibelius and Nielsen).⁶³

Once again, relating matters of technical aesthetics to those of philosophic ontology, I cite this question by Eli Siegel from his essay “Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?”: “Does every work of art show the kinship to be found in objects and all realities?—and at the same time the subtle and tremendous difference, the drama of otherness, that one can find among the things of the world?”⁶⁴ To my ears, the *Far East Suite* resoundingly achieves this. Everywhere, through its “web” of motivic interrelations, we hear echoes of the Grundgestalt.

One of the most remarkable features of *Far East Suite* lies in how its concluding movement, “Ad Lib on Nippon,” is a very climax of interrelations, echoing ideas from nearly every previous movement. Yet it was recorded more than two years before “Mount Harissa,” “Tourist Point of View,” or “Blue Pepper.” The implication is that Ellington (who composed all four pieces, though Jimmy Hamilton may have had a hand in “Ad Lib on Nippon”) deeply coordinated them. How much of this coordination was conscious, how much was not, likely we will never know—just as mysteries will always remain as to exactly the degree to which Ellington and Strayhorn coordinated their work explicitly, and how much of this work was done by spontaneous artistic decisions. But that there was coordination on a motivic level is testified to by the notes themselves. I give just one instance—a somewhat subtle example. (There are many others, far more obvious.) Compare the figure in Example 30, heard five times in the opening “Fugi” section of “Ad Lib on Nippon,” with a figure from “Mount Harissa”—also heard, incidentally, five times in its movement. There is the same basic melodic trajectory, and the same, cautious, “repeat-each-note-before-moving-on,” rhythm.⁶⁵

Ending on a Philosophic Note

As I have indicated, it is my belief that technical issues always carry philosophic implications. Jazz certainly has been an art of entertainment; an art, too, of self-expression, and of group solidarity. But it has also been a philosophic art, impelled — just as certainly as “verbally discursive” philosophy — by the desire to tell the truth about reality. From the perspective of Aesthetic Realism, the subject matter of jazz is nothing smaller than the world itself. This world is immediate, gutsy, vernacular, and colorful. But it is also abstract—a drama of eternal philosophic opposites. As Eli Siegel noted in his essay “The World as Such, Is Present in Jazz: Some Indications”:

⁶³ See Robert Simpson, *Sibelius and Nielsen* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1965), and Lionel Pike, *Beethoven, Sibelius and the “Profound Logic”*: *Studies in Symphonic Analysis* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Athlone Press, 1978).

⁶⁴ Siegel, “Is Beauty,” 283.

⁶⁵ Those who enjoy tracing “favorite motivic figures” across Ellington’s career, might, in this instance, consider the repeated-note, scalar descending saxophones in parallel triads in *Rockin’ in Rhythm* of 1930. Duke Ellington and His Orchestra, *Rockin’ in Rhythm*, Okeh 8869, 1930, 78 rpm; reissued on Duke Ellington, *The Okeh Ellington*, Columbia C2K46177, 1991, compact disc.

Ad Lib on Nippon



Mount Harissa



The image displays two musical excerpts from Duke Ellington's *The Far East Suite*. The first excerpt, titled "Ad Lib on Nippon," features a piano part with complex chordal textures and a bass line with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The second excerpt, titled "Mount Harissa," shows a piano part with a melodic line and a bass line with a simple eighth-note accompaniment. Both excerpts are in common time and use a key signature of two sharps (D major).

Example 30. A comparison of two figures from *The Far East Suite*.

The world is change and sameness, and it is change and sameness as one thing that is present in all art or beauty and makes that art or beauty what it is ... [The] contemplation of the world or universe as one thing with many things, many things as that one thing, can make the world seem beautiful, agreeably tense, a thing of deep impact.⁶⁶

Motivic composition depends on ability to perceive these opposites—unity and diversity, change and sameness—together. Ellington was a master of the art.

My purpose has been three-fold. First, to indicate the fruitfulness of the concept of Grundgestalt for jazz studies, including as a way to integrate our notions of improvised jazz and composed jazz. As we look at the techniques Ellington used to achieve compositional cohesion, the point to be emphasized is that he never strayed from improvisatory procedures. As Albert Murray observed in a 1983 talk entitled “Improvisation and the Creative Process”: “It is ... the process of extension, elaboration, and refinement that creates the work of art.”⁶⁷ And as Wolfram Knauer has noted, Ellington, even when composing most strictly, retained a gift for “simulated improvisation.”⁶⁸ So much of what sounds as if it were in the moment was, in fact, carefully thought through by Ellington. Or, as the theory of Grundgestalt would have it, carefully “improvised” on paper. And one should never forget that with Ellington there was always a stage of composition beyond the paper: namely, the changes he made on the spot during recording sessions.

⁶⁶ Eli Siegel, “The World as Such, Is Present in Jazz: Some Indications,” in *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known* 844, June 7, 1989, 1–2. The essay, from the late 1950s, offers a consideration of Shapiro and Hentoff, *The Jazz Makers* (New York: Grove Press Books, 1957).

⁶⁷ Albert Murray, “Improvisation and the Creative Process,” in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 111.

⁶⁸ Wolfram Knauer, “‘Simulated Improvisation’ in Duke Ellington’s *Black, Brown and Beige*,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 18, no. 1/2 (1990): 20–38.

I have also wanted to suggest that through the Grundgestalt concept we might find a way to speak of jazz and the European classical tradition in a single breath without distorting either, or subsuming one to the other. Both traditions hold a key axiom in common: the taking of a core musical unit (usually a simple and compact melodic or rhythmic cell) and varying of it over time in such a manner that one can still discern its presence in the multitude of later forms to which it gives rise.

And let us go further to more obviously philosophic territory. When one considers that this “axiom” exists all through the history of the world’s music, and is, for example, present in both Islamic and sub-Saharan African music (albeit in ways unique to these cultures, and hardly to be judged on the basis of a Eurocentric musical grammar), it does provide suggestive evidence that, as Eli Siegel argued, the desire to be diverse and yet deeply unified—to live adventurously and yet remain true to oneself—is indeed, a universal aesthetic desire.⁶⁹

But this, of course, is the subject for yet another essay.

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⁶⁹ A classic exposition of this perspective on world anthropology is Arnold Percey’s 1973 Columbia University doctoral dissertation, *Oksapmin Society and World View* (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1973; Percey notably completed his Ph.D. in the Department of Anthropology, where Margaret Mead was his principal advisor). See also “The Aesthetic Method in Self-Conflict,” pp. 91–122, a chapter of Eli Siegel’s *Self and World: An Explanation of Aesthetic Realism*. (New York: Definition Press, 1981).

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Abstract

A key to the enduring power of Duke Ellington’s best compositions is their motivic integrity. For this reason, it is revelatory to consider his music from the perspective of “Grundgestalt” theory—a mode of analysis pioneered by Arnold Schoenberg. This theory argues that beneath the diversity of any composition is a single motivic idea. The value of this methodology for the understanding of jazz as a whole, and Ellington in particular, is explored through a study of three of Ellington’s finest works: *The Mooche* (1928), *Ko-Ko* (1940), and *Far East Suite* (1963–1966). This essay also explores the impact of Will Marion Cook’s motivic thinking upon Ellington, and the value of looking at motivic composition, per se, from the perspective of Aesthetic Realism, the philosophy founded by Eli Siegel, whose central principle is: “The world, art, and self explain each other: each is the aesthetic oneness of opposites.”