

WALTER LINDENBAUM:

PEER GYNT GOES HOLLYWOOD – ELLINGTON PLAYS GRIEG

In the first place I would like to thank the International Grieg Society for giving me the opportunity of speaking to you. However, due to the short time available to me today I am not able to deal with all of the complexities of this subject and propose instead to summarise some of the main points.

Whilst preparing a lecture for the 2. German Edvard Grieg conference I became aware that compositions by Grieg, notably „In the Hall of the Mountain King“ often find their way into rock music, especially Heavy Metal. This realisation led me to investigate other branches of music as well. So I found a CD by the Duke Ellington Orchestra entitled „Three Suites“ with recording of:

- *TSCHAIKOVSKY, NUTCRACKER-SUITE*
- *GRIEG, PEER GYNT-SUITES 1 & 2*
- *ELLINGTON – STRAYHORN, SUITE THURSDAY.*¹

The recording dates from June 1960, a time during which the Duke Ellington Orchestra was pulling in record crowds at the Riviera Hotel in Las Vegas. They were made in Hollywood, so from an American perspective, just „next door“.

The title of the Ellington – Strayhorn composition on the album goes to prove that the man himself appreciated the form „suite“ in the loose sense of the word. The concert pieces composed by Ellington and Strayhorn have the following four points in common:

1. They contain jazz passages as well as other elements.
2. The underlying intention is to create or to illustrate a mood or some literary or historical events or even to transmit a message through a range of instrumental sounds (cp. Ellington's „*mood style*“). Joachim-Ernst Berendt calls Ellington „the greatest painter with sound within conventional jazz“.²
3. They often arise by developing the 8, 12 or 16 bar Blues or of popular song formulas (eg. ABA, AABA, ABAC etc.).
4. Most of them are suites, which contain independent and often even contrasting pieces, which are at best connected by an overall idea.

This gives us a hint of how Ellington came in the first place to arrange the *Nutcracker Suite* and excerpts from the *Peer-Gynt-Suites*. The title of the original album is: *SWINGING*

¹ Duke Ellington, *Three Suites*, CBS 1990, CK 46825.

² Joachim-Ernst Berendt, *Ein Fenster aus Jazz*, Fischer, Frankfurt am Main 1977, p. 110.

SUITES by Edward E. and Edward G. „Duke“ Ellington’s proper name is Edward Kennedy Ellington – note please the spelling of the word „Edward“ in both cases.

John Edward Hasse maintains that „by stressing the strengths and unique contributions of each band member, he (i.e. Ellington) fashioned those special qualities into something greater“³. Ellington’s major achievement was to create blends of individual and collective creativity’s. Gunther Schuller calls the components Ellington uses in doing this „interacting sonic variables“⁴.

He achieves „Ellingtonia“ through clever arrangement which are written specially for his particular musicians and by the incorporation of new types of sounds. In this sense, one could say that his musicians played more as an „orchestra“ than a big band. Mozart often composed in the same vein by writing arias for particular singers.

The Ellington orchestra achieved its breakthrough as a result of its five year run at the New York Cotton Club from 1927 to 1932. Some members of the Cotton Club lineup still took part in the Peer Gynt recording in 1960. Although a few musicians left the band from time to time, most of them eventually returned. As it was often said in those days: „You can take the man out of the Ellington Band, but you could not take the Ellington out of the man“.

During the Cotton Club years Ellington created something which today would be called a marketing concept, the jungle sound, which supposedly mimics the animal noises of Africa, intended as a metaphor of the city as a jungle (cp. *Jungle Nights In Harlem*).

The central figure in the development of this sound is trumpeter „Bubby“ Miley whose „growling“ and muttering intensifies the tone of his instrument, combined with his use of mutes and plungers – originally a real „plumber’s plunger“ – to create the wah-wah-effect. Somewhat later Tricky Sam Nanton adapted these techniques for the trombone. The extended drum-set served to enrich not only the sound but also the visual impression of the Cotton Club jungle shows.

Other quite important features of the jungle style are the extended use of altered harmonies and the more frequent use of the minor, which you can find in Grieg’s compositions as well.

Ellington singles out five pieces from both Peer Gynt suites. With the exception of *In the Hall of the Mountain King* he transposes them and changes the tempo as this table demonstrates.

³ John Edward Hasse, *Beyond Categories: The Life And Genius of Duke Ellington*; quotation taken from: <http://www.ilinks.net/~holmesr/dukessay.htm> (23.05.00)

⁴ Gunther Schuller, *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz 1930 – 1945*. New York / Oxford 1983, pp. 74 ff..

Title	GRIEG		→	ELLINGTON	
	key	bpm		key	bpm
<i>Morning Mood</i>	E	60	→	Des	74
<i>In the Hall of the Mountain King</i>	h	138	→	h	220 (halftime)
<i>Solveig 's Song</i>	a	72 / 120	→	f	60 / 140
<i>Åse 's Death</i>	h	50	→	b	48
<i>Anitra 's Dance</i>	a	160	→	g	194

Four pieces remain in minor keys, only *Morning Mood* is in major.

In order to appreciate the jazz transposition let us take a quick, but closer look at just one piece.

IN THE HALL OF THE MOUNTAIN KING

„Mr. Grieg, had he led a band, would probably have swung *Mountain King* himself, but perhaps not with Ellington 's harmonies and Ellington 's plungers“, Irving Townsend maintains in the CD booklet.⁵ Grieg himself, however, demanded muted horns in the beginning of the piece.

The changes Ellington makes go back to the swing style.

The theme is expressed by the tenor saxophone, when it changes to major Aaron Bell starts playing a walking bass and puts more rhythm into it. The repetition of the theme is played by high trumpets using plungers (cf. *jungle music*) with seemingly improvised saxophone counterparts. After the theme is repeated by the big band sections – first reeds, then brass – then comes a piano solo of 32 bars. It begins with an upbeat. On the downbeat of the first full bar Ellington presents the flatted fifth, which is on the one hand featured in the theme of *In*

⁵ Irving Townsend, Booklet to the CD: Duke Ellington, *Three Suites*, CBS 1990, CK 46825.

the Hall of the Mountain King on the other hand in the 1932 Ellington song. This is one of the first times this blue note is used, especially in such a stressed manner.



As the tempo is quite fast, the Ellington piece does not include the acceleration Grieg demands. The Duke instead performs the intended intensification by executing a powerful tutti with strong brass beats followed by an alto solo, leading to several repetitions of the theme, the last of which is incomplete because it only consists of the theme's head, ending with the altered chord Bm^{7#9}; this harmonic structure can be taken as a mixture of tonic minor and dominant major. At the very end you can hear four little figures played by the piano, which cannot be classified as either major or minor because they can be understood either as seconds which resolve into thirds (Π minor) or as leading notes aiming to their tonic keynotes (Π major).



In general one can say that Duke Ellington's treatment of Grieg's music is a mixture of respect and innovation. On the one hand Ellington uses typical big band arrangements, on the other hand, as stated previously, he links Grieg compositions with the instrumental abilities of his individual musicians creating „interacting sonic variables“ (Schuller). Grieg's sound stems from harmony, Ellington's is due to the way he incorporates his musicians into the pieces. The combination of both is unique.