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Three-minute masterpieces

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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills

Louis Johnston on Three-Minute Masterpieces

MAY 2, 2019



I always enjoy April 29. Duke Ellington was born on April 29, 1899, and I try to celebrate by listening to his music and reflecting on his legacy. Back in 1989 I got to see [Joe Pass](#) and his trio celebrate Duke's birthday. I was in San Diego [for a conference](#) and the great historian [Morton Rothstein](#), with whom I [shared a love of jazz](#), asked if I'd like to join him for the concert. Of course!

April 29 this year found me thinking about Duke Ellington, Jimmie Blanton, Alexander Gerschenkron, and three-minute masterpieces. You probably know the first name but not the second or third, so allow me to elaborate...

Jimmie Blanton joined Ellington's orchestra in 1939. According to Terry Teachout in [Duke: A Life of Duke Ellington](#), "Blanton left St. Louis with [Ellington] on November 3, and Ellington started featuring him at once... Less than three years later, he was dead (p. 202)."

In January 1940, tenor saxophonist Ben Webster joined the band and the result was the ensemble many consider the high point of the Ellington orchestras: the so-called Blanton-Webster Band of 1940 to 1942.

The first Blanton-Webster recording took place on March 6, 1940. Two classic pieces came from that session: “Jack the Bear” and “Ko-Ko.” According to Teachout,

“Jack the Bear” was a previously unrecorded Ellington instrumental that Billy Strayhorn had rewritten to feature Jimmie Blanton. As if to proclaim to the world that all bets were off, Blanton launched “Jack the Bear” by stepping out in front of the band and tossing off a lighter-than-air eight-bar solo. Because his style long ago became the lingua franca of jazz bass playing, the impact that this solo had on those who first heard it seven decades ago is no longer possible for contemporary listeners to fully appreciate (p. 207-208).



Jimmie Blanton

As for “Ko-Ko,”

From the curt trombone riff that sets the piece in motion to the spiraling bitonal crescendo that brings it to a charging close, “Ko-Ko” is the greatest of Ellington’s three-minute masterpieces, an exercise in motivic development as taut as *Reminiscing in Tempo* is shapeless (p. 208).

Soon the three-minute masterpieces were pouring out of Ellington:

“Jack the Bear” and “Ko-Ko”... ushered in a flood tide of new work that continued without crest for week after week. Nine days later came “Concerto for Cootie... In May the band cut “Bojangles,” “Cotton Tail,” “Dusk,” “Never No Lament,” and “A Portrait of Bert Williams,” followed by “Harlem Air-Shaft,” “All Too Soon,” “Rumpus in Richmond,” and “Sepia Panorama” in July, “In A Mellowtone” in September, and “Across the Track Blues” and “Warm Valley” in October (p. 209).

Teachout nicely sums up this period:

The records [Ellington and the orchestra] cut in 1940 were setting a new standard, not just for him but for

jazz in general, and today the recordings of what has come to be known as the “Blanton-Webster band” are generally thought to mark the summit of his compositional achievement. Long before his death, that view was enough of a commonplace for Ellington to find it oppressive. “I find I have all these other lifetimes to compete with,” he said.



Ellington spent most of his life convinced that he needed to compose “serious” music (rhapsodies, concertos, operas) to be accepted as a great composer. Three-minute masterpieces wouldn’t do the trick.

Alexander Gerschenkron felt the same way Ellington did. Despite his Harvard professorship, despite writing one of the great articles in economics and economic history (“[Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective](#)”), despite adding the “[Gerschenkron effect](#)” to the literature, and despite writing an [insightful book on democracy in Germany before World War I](#), he thought of himself as a failure.



Alexander Gerschenkron

[Nicholas Dawidoff](#), Gerschenkron’s grandson, wrote a wonderful biography and put the matter well:

Editors from national magazines frequently tried to assign Shura [the name by which Dawidoff knew his grandfather] essays and articles and he waved them all away. Among the many publications he turned down were *Esquire*, the *New Republic*, and the *New York Times Magazine*. When Francis Brown, the editor of the *New York Times Book Review*, asked Shura to do some work for him, Shura astounded Brown by telling him, with some annoyance, that he had no time for an “extra-curricular” activity.

What did Gerschenkron think he should have been doing?

Therein lay the rub that vexed Shura's professional life. The Big Book – “Za Beeg Buke,” as it came out in the Gerschenkron elocution – was Shura's El Dorado, his holy grail, the pot of coins at the end of the scholarly rainbow. He goaded his students to complete “a large literary work,” making them feel that they were nothing until they did. Meanwhile, he never published one himself.

Why do so many people feel like Ellington and Gerschenkron? It's so terribly destructive to a person's psyche, not to mention it ignores how important is short, clear work. (See Deirdre McCloskey's [interview](#) in The Chronicle of Higher Education for a different point of view. McCloskey was a Gerschenkron student.)

I used to think that way. I thought that to be a true scholar I needed to write academic journal articles, work on deep statistical estimates, and go to conferences. I realized, over the past ten years, that this is a path for a scholar to take but not the path. It's important that dense, technical tomes that only specialists can understand be written. But not all of us must do this!

It's just as important that some of us take what we know in the academy and connect it to what is going on in the world. This role goes by several names: public intellectual is one, thought leader is another. I like the way [Nick Hayes](#) once put the matter to me: “Be a journalist among professors and a professor among journalists.”

In other words, we need to write three-minute masterpieces. Let's get to it.

Louis Johnston

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