



PHILIPS MUSIC HERALD

Such sweet thunder



Ellington's tribute to Shakespeare

If ever it becomes known that someone has written a jazz concerto based on the poems of Keats or Longfellow, most people will surely raise their eyebrows and shrug their shoulders. But when the news leaked out that Edward Kennedy Ellington, better known as "The Duke", had composed and recorded a special suite in honour of the greatest playwright of all time, no insider blinked an eye. This lack of surprise is not really surprising. So seasoned are Ellington admirers to his boundless talents, so prepared are they for the unexpected, that the announcements of his Shakespearian suite were greeted only with enthusiasm, curiosity, and impatience.

And after hearing it most people will find "enthusiasm" too small a word to describe their feelings. For Ellington's amazing composition does far more than satisfy one's curiosity, it satisfies every wish one might have concerning present-day works in the modern jazz idiom and possibly it will even prove the road to still further horizons than other creative jazzmen are at present trying to reach.

It is, of course, idle to speculate upon what might have happened if Ellington and Shakespeare had been contemporaries. But there is no doubt that Duke, who calls himself an "amateur playwright" is a very professional showman. And there is also no doubt that the immortal Bard had rhythm in his soul. The artistic meeting of two great creative men has achieved all the results one could hope for: "Such sweet thunder" is a major musical work from all points of view.

Two questions may be asked when this jazzy suite is the subject of a discussion – what inspired Ellington to write it and where did he get his title from. The first question is easily answered. It is true that Duke visited the Hathaway cottage during his first tour of Britain in 1933, but more likely his successful appearance at the Stratford (Ontario) Shakespearian Festival some years ago was the spark that ignited his desire to create a work based on famous characters like Lady Macbeth, Caesar, and Othello.







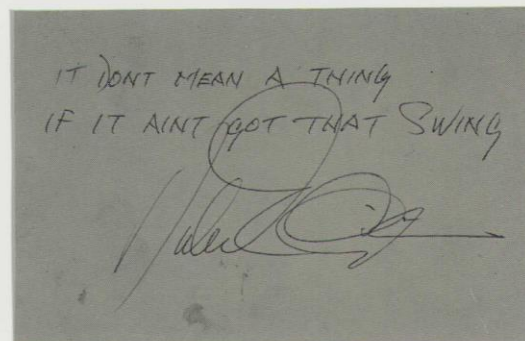
For Ellington was truly thrilled by the theatrical performances he witnessed there and no less by the warm welcome extended to him and his band. On his return from Canada he started composing immediately. "Such sweet thunder" had its public première in April 1957 and was wonderfully received by audience and critics alike, its last notes almost drowning in sweet and thunderous applause!

The strange title? We find it in Act IV, Scene 1, of "A Midsummer Night's Dream": "I never heard so musical a discord, such sweet thunder..." And one can leave it to Ellington to make strange phrases world-famous... such as his former compositions "On a turquoise cloud" or "A tone parallel to Harlem".

All right, you may say, that's why he wrote the suite and where he found its peculiar name, but what about the music itself?

The answer cannot very easily be supplied. Ellington wouldn't be one of jazzland's few and true geniuses if he had written a non-jazzy score. Throughout "Such sweet thunder" one hears the solid, driving, inspiring beat of jazz – and if one does not hear it, one can somehow feel it. Present, too, is that incomparable "blue" sound of the brass and reed sections, for more than thirty years now Ellington's orchestral trademark. But those are only basic ingredients. What Ellington has really tried to do is, in his own words, "to parallel the vignettes of some Shakespearian characters in miniature – sometimes to the point of caricature".

Thus we find Puck from "A Midsummer Night's Dream" represented by a very lively trumpet; Lady Macbeth by a jazz waltz in proper three-four time with piano, alto, and trumpet solos; Romeo and Juliet by alto and tenor saxophones proclaiming their love in a most beautiful melody, and Hamlet ("Madness in great ones must not unwatched go")



by an almost stratospheric trumpet, all but disappearing into outer space at the end.

These are only loose examples, for there is far more to marvel at during the 12 separate sections that make up this suite. The composer has not only tried to re-create Shakespeare's characters instrumentally, he has also succeeded in creating a specific atmosphere, as in the case of the section "Sonnet for Caesar", of which the final measures musically foretell of tragedy.

He has also taken some liberties (and the word "some" must be taken very liberally indeed). In the section "Telecasters", for instance, he has combined characters from two plays, explaining that "the three witches and Iago had something in common in that they all had something to say, so we call them the Telecasters..."

Of Lady Macbeth, Ellington said that "though she was a lady of noble birth, we suspect there was a little ragtime in her soul". And in connection with Hamlet, the Duke exclaimed that "in those days crazy did not mean the same thing it means now", writing nevertheless a crazy piece of orchestral jazz at this point of the suite. But everything he has done is beautifully musical and inspired, from the rocking title-introduction to the sonnets, which he has scored to coincide with the fourteen-line sonnet form. "Such sweet thunder" is certainly a fine piece of music, even when we forget its association with Shakespeare. And if there is any criticism to be made, it is only by sadly stating that no other symphonic or jazz orchestra will ever be able to perform it as lovingly, perfectly, and jazzily as Ellington's own group.

Which in itself is a statement that more or less refers to any of Ellington's more than 1000(!) major and minor compositions.

