

HARMONY IN HARLEM

presents

SUCH SWEET THUNDER

By Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn

In 1956, Duke Ellington was invited to bring his orchestra to the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Ontario, Canada. At this time Duke was busy completing another major suite, *A Drum is a Woman*, a work commissioned specifically to herald the introduction of colour television. It was after the event that Duke and co-composer Billy Strayhorn began work on the suite *Such Sweet Thunder*, completed by April 1957 for a performance at the Town Hall in New York City and ultimately at a return performance at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in September that year.

The suite is best described as a collection of vignettes of Shakespearean characters, its title bringing a musical reference from Act IV, Scene 1, of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "I never heard so musical a discord, such sweet thunder". Duke illuminated the intent and inspiration behind each movement, yet whilst it is true that Duke visited the Hathaway cottage during his first visit to the UK in 1933, one might take with a pinch of salt the claim that he and Billy read through all Shakespeare's works in preparation for the suite. One may question the musical relevance to the one or two characters in question but that aside, in terms of quality of music, the suite has remained one of the most acclaimed jazz albums of all time since its release in 1957.

One notable aspect of the suite is that four of the movements are sonnets. They are indeed sonnets in musical form: each has 14 phrases in iambic pentameter – five stressed and five unstressed syllables. The shape of the phrases mimics the rhyming scheme of the English sonnet (abab CDCDEFEGG) and the use of the final rhyming couplet (GG) as a change of context or conclusion to the questions and metaphors posed in the opening lines.

1. Such Sweet Thunder

The title theme of the suite is inspired by the powerful orator Othello. Duke said: "the inspiration is the sweet and swinging, very convincing story Othello told Desdemona. It must have been the most, because when her father complained and tried to have the marriage annulled, the Duke of Venice said that if Othello had said this to his daughter she would have gone for it too."

2. Sonnet For Caesar

The tragedy of Julius Caesar is paralleled in this mournful clarinet solo, perhaps the most beautifully crafted of the sonnets in the suite. Notice the sombre pattern on the drums – reminiscent of the beating of tambours in a funeral procession 2000 years ago?

3. Sonnet To Hank Cinq

Referring to Henry V, Duke said very little about this sonnet other than “the changes of tempo have to do with the changes of pace and the map as a result of wars”. A demanding tour de force for lead trombone exploring the full range of the instrument.

4. Lady Mac

“Though she was a lady of noble birth, we suspect there was a little ragtime in her soul.” Duke’s description of Lady Macbeth does, I fear, rather gloss over the fact that she persuaded her husband to murder King Duncan in his bed, only foretold by the ominous ending to an otherwise light and elegant jazz waltz featuring a solo on flugelhorn and 2nd alto saxophone.

5. Sonnet In Search Of A Moor

A sonnet for double bass, said to depict Othello’s tenderness and pathos rather than his thunderous oratorical skill. The simplicity of the melody, accompanied only by three reed instruments, allows the listener to pick out the meter of the sonnet form easily in this delicate glimpse of the Moor.

6. The Telecasters

Duke Ellington said: “We took the liberty of combining characters from two plays. We thought the three witches and Iago had something in common in that they all had something to say, so we call them the Telecasters.” To *telecast*, as in to *broadcast*: the role of soothsayer - the three witches - or the spreader of destructive and manipulative rumours – Iago. The three witches in the form of trombones form the backdrop to the baritone saxophone, the scheming Iago.

7. Up And Down, Up and Down, I Will Lead Them Up And Down

A Midsummer Night’s Dream: Puck’s hilarious manoeuvring of the characters, making them fall in and out of love with each other in many combinations, is reflected in the ever-changing couplings of instruments from a subset of the orchestra: trombones, violin and four reeds. Puck, in the form of a trumpet, interjects from time to time. This complex polyphonic and multi-tonal work by Billy Strayhorn is an undoubted masterpiece, with humour injected at the close: the trumpet, Puck, vocalises the words: “Lord, what fools these mortals be.”

8. Sonnet For Sister Kate

An important part of Duke Ellington's "tonal palette" dating back to the 1920s was the use of a pixie mute and plunger by a trombonist, an effect which can at times be likened more to a human voice. In the fashion of Sonnet In Search Of A Moor, this piece dedicated to Katherina of Taming Of The Shrew features a soloist backed mostly by just three reed instruments.

9. The Star-crossed Lovers

One of Billy Strayhorn's most renowned compositions, dedicated to the lovers Romeo and Juliet. This moving and beautiful piece of music was one of alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges' most memorable moments with the Duke.

10. Madness In Great Ones

A parallel to Hamlet's character as he was deceiving his stepfather, hoping to be considered mad, seeking an unguarded admission to the murder of his father. Quirky passages, sudden changes in character and style all based on a relatively simple underlying harmonic structure, typical Ellington. The piece ends in whimpering madness on the trumpet.

11. Half The Fun

Picture Cleopatra gliding down the Nile in a golden royal barge, selling both her power and her sex, to put it crudely, to the Romans. Duke Ellington's rather obtuse comment on this scene was: "The generally accepted theory is that the mood was *specific*". The title refers to the 1930s airline slogan "Getting there is half the fun!", as this is about the river journey, not the resulting romantic entanglement between Antony and Cleopatra. This was no ordinary barge, no ordinary river journey, as described by Shakespeare's character Enobarbus:

The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne,
Burned on the water: the poop was beaten gold;
Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
The winds were lovesick with them; the oars were silver,
Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
The water which they beat to follow faster,
As amorous of their strokes.

12. Circle Of Fourths

The four elements of Shakespeare's artistic contribution, as Ellington saw them: tragedy, comedy, history and the sonnets. In a sense this was a simple ruse to allow him to construct a harmonic progression in fourths, leading full circle from C-major and back again through all the major keys, as a vehicle for calisthenics from a tenor saxophone.