

# Spotlighting obscure gems in Duke's crown

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PLAIN DEALER MUSIC CRITIC

The centennial of a composer's birth can become a predictable ritual. Drag out the masterpieces, send in the crowds and celebrate the greatness.

So thank goodness "Jazz on the Circle" avoided the obvious when it began a communitywide centennial salute to Duke Ellington, dubbed "Everything Ellington" Sunday night at Severance Hall. Both of the works on the program have been out of public circulation for decades. Yet "A Drum is a Woman" and "My People" are prime examples of Ellington's gift for creating music that energizes and caresses the subject at hand.

The night was something of an Ellington extravaganza, with a superb 18-piece band, three elegant vocalists and the fine Jazz Art Ensemble from the Cleveland School of the Arts to bring the neglected pieces to life. Not everything ran smoothly. The first half, a performance of "A Drum is a

## REVIEW

### Ellington Celebration

"Woman" had moments of indecision in terms of balance and spontaneity. It needed another rehearsal or two.

But what the performers contributed often confirmed how Ellington stood apart from others. "A Drum is a Woman," which he wrote in the mid 1950's with Billy Strayhorn, overflows with instrumental and vocal pieces so varied in jazz styles and vital in design that the ear is consistently intrigued and bewitched.

A so called jazz opera, the work isn't the epitome of coherence. The narrative ostensibly traces the history of Jazz as a drum which is transformed into the exotic and elusive Madame Zazz, who travels the world seeking the ideal companion and musical interpreter (always named Joe). Along the way, Ellington and Strayhorn explore calypso, New Orleans,

blues, Caribbean, swing and myriad other forms. Nevermind the narrative, in other words. Just listen to this fabulous music.

And fabulous it largely sounded as **given explosive energy and poetic urgency by the band led by Christopher Cherney**. The ensemble included two veterans of the original "Drum" performance in 1956- percussionist **Candido**, a virtuosic wonder on congas, and trombonist **Britt Woodman**, whose lyrical suavity came only briefly to the forefront.

Another veteran was vocalist Joya Sherrill, at 71 still a vibrant stylist and the genuine Ellington article. Her vocal colleagues were soprano **Darby Dizard, capable of soaring operatically or belting with the best of them**, and Cleve Douglas, a dapper jazz singer with a commanding sense of phrasing and inflection. WCPN's Dee Perry was the vivacious narrator.

"My People," Ellington's 1963 celebration of African-American life, came across as an exuberant

gem. There is no story line here, simply a series of dazzling jazz numbers, including an extended series of blues pieces that shows the composer at the height of his powers. Everything is irresistible, occasionally naughty, frequently poignant, always communicative.

The wealth of ideas is remarkable, especially when Ellington sets the band on a quick survey of jazz styles, "Montage," in which the players have chances to contribute shining variations of many themes. Among the dazzling instrumentalists were trumpeter Barrie Lee Hall and saxophonist Sayyd Abdul Al-Khabyr, both alumni of the Ellington band. Sherrill (in her third radiant dress of the night), **Dizard and Douglas once again were terrific**, and tap dancer Alfred Bruce Bradley did his charismatic most to imprint his artistry into the Severance stage.

An excellent centennial start. Bring on more Ellington.