

The Importance and Significance of Black, Brown and Beige by Duke Ellington (1943)

1. Premiered as an instrumental work. DE explains, "You can say anything you want on trombone, but you gotta be careful with words."
2. Elevates the image of a jazz orchestra: from Cotton Club (which was essentially a mock plantation with blacks performing for whites - a continuation of minstrelsy) to Carnegie Hall. Showed DE and his orchestra as artists not just entertainers.
3. Premiered to an interracial audience at an important place: Carnegie Hall, New York City.
4. BBB had a huge media build up. Tickets were sold out 10 days in advance of the performance.
5. BBB is an extended musical work - 40+ minutes long. Reveals DE as a serious composer in addition to a songwriter, band leader, pianist and entertainer.
6. Capitalized on Black involvement in World War 2.
7. Celebrates Black achievement and puts it in the national spotlight focusing on Black identity and pride.

8. Was a high profile event to advance the politics of race through music, without words.
9. There is a detailed verbal narrative (Boola, 39 pages in length) written by DE which has never been released or published. This narrative did not appear at the premier.
11. BBB is a historically informed composition.
12. DE and his orchestra were (always) well dressed therefore subverting and undercutting Black stereotypes of minstrelsy. They presented a strong visual image.

“With his elegant appearance, sophisticated music and carefully chosen words, Ellington purposely provided a strong counter to the way Black Americans were usually portrayed during the era of Jim Crow.” (Harvey Cohen, In His Own Words)

13. DE was a major world celebrity, travelling all over the world with his orchestra. He had huge crossover appeal. He was viewed as a tremendous artistic/cultural/musical force in Europe; France in particular. One French critic wrote, “Such music is not only a new art form but a new reason for living.” DE used this celebrity status to confront racism musically. At home in the US he was relegated to inferior status through Jim Crow, segregation and racism.

14. DE: "For a long time, social protest and pride in Black culture and history have been the most significant themes in what we've done." (quoted in Pierpont, pp 9-10)

15. DE felt that by doing one's absolute best (in everything) racism will just naturally fade away.

16. DE: "It's time a big piece was written from the inside by a Negro."

17. A piece of such scope in a venue like Carnegie Hall was a radical act of Black Pride: a declaration that the life history and identity of African Americans were equal in significance to their white counterparts.