

Duke Ellington: Great American Musician and Composer Teacher Guide

Duke Ellington is the quintessential American composer.
--Albert Murray, critic

Encourage your students to consider the life and music of Duke Ellington in the same manner as that of any other great composer or person of accomplishment; that is, within the context of his times and the work he produced that has stood the test of time. Edward Kennedy Duke Ellington (1899-1974) was a multi-talented musician who would become famous as a composer, jazz bandleader, as a pianist.

As a bandleader, his record of keeping an outstanding ensemble together and getting the best from his musicians for nearly 50 years has seldom been equaled. He was famous also for his skills as a pianist who influenced an entire generation. Duke Ellington's vast body of compositions are a testament to his greatness as a composer who wrote music that went beyond the category of jazz and became symbolic of the originality and wide-reaching influence of African American and American music worldwide.

A. General Objective: To introduce students to the music and legacy of Duke Ellington as a major American musician and composer.

B. Specific Objectives:

1. To introduce students to a variety of Ellington compositions.
2. To identify those elements that made the sound of the Ellington orchestra unique.
3. To identify members of his band whose talents were featured in his compositions.

The **Duke Ellington Matching Game** is a musical biography of Ellington featuring six compositions from his career as a composer, bandleader, and pianist. The activity **Duke Ellington's Music** focuses on specific musicians for whom he wrote music that gave his orchestra a sound and style unique in American music.

Time: A minimum 45-minute class period.

Format: Students may explore these activities independently as a homework assignment, or you may lead them in a classroom activity.

Independent study: Direct students to the SJMO website at [insert address] and instruct them to explore the Duke Ellington Matching Game and Duke Ellington's Music. You may ask them to complete the chart at the beginning of the matching game activity and their written work from the music activities so that you can correct their answers.

Classroom study: Before presenting this activity to the class as a group activity, students may be sent to [insert website address] to explore these activities independently. It is not necessary for students to have visited the site before participating in the classroom activity.

Materials Required for Classroom Study

*Hard copies of the pictures and paragraphs downloaded from the Duke Ellington Matching Game section.

*PC with internet access and speakers.

*Paper and pencil for each student, for the writing activities.

Procedure for Classroom Study

1. Duke Ellington Matching Game: Paste the pictures to a wall. Invite students to observe the pictures carefully and discuss their content. They should read each paragraph and decide which picture corresponds to each paragraph. As they decide, tape the appropriate paragraph underneath each picture. Finally, listen to the audio clips and decide which one corresponds to each paragraph.

2. Duke Ellington=s Music:

For each activity do the following:

- a. Read the text and directions out loud and play the listening examples for students to hear.
- b. Stop and allow students to complete the writing exercises.

The National Standards for Arts Education

Music Standards, Grades 5-8

Content Standard #6: Listening to, analyzing, and describing music

Content Standard #7: Evaluating music and music performances

Content Standard #8: Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts

Music Technology Standards, Grades 5-8

Curriculum and Scheduling #3: Teachers employ instructional strategies that appropriately

utilize the unique capabilities of technology

United States History Standards, Grades 5-8

Standard #29: Understands the struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension

of civil liberties

Language Arts Standards, Grades 5-8

Standard #1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

Standard #3: Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions

Standard #8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes

Duke Ellington, the Composer

Audio: *Daybreak Express*

Photo: Ellington at the piano composing

Duke Ellington is the quintessential American composer.
--Albert Murray, music critic

Daybreak Express is one of Duke Ellington's most original compositions. It provides a vivid picture of a train speeding down the railroad tracks, with its sounds and bouncing rhythms heard and felt in the music. Duke Ellington loved trains, and he and his band spent long hours on them traveling all over the United States. As there was hardly a day he did not write down some musical idea, if only on a piece of scrap paper, he often composed while riding on trains. *Daybreak Express* is an example of **program music**, where music is used to describe a non-musical image or event. Use your imagination and pretend you're on the train with Duke and his band!

Activity:

In *Daybreak Express*, Duke Ellington featured trumpeter Cootie Williams and the saxophone section of the band to describe the movement of the train. Follow the outline as you listen to the music and write the words *trumpet* or *saxophones* beside each sentence below.

1. The train begins sliding slowly out of the station
2. The train whistle blows
3. The locomotive gets faster gradually and whizzes down the track
4. The whistle blows as train speeds along
5. A bell sounds as train slowly comes to a stop

In some parts of the music, the entire band plays. Did you hear them? Where?

Duke Ellington, the Bandleader

Photo: Ellington and the Band

Audio: *Take the A Train* [Introductory/background audio]

Ellington managed to create an orchestra that sounded unlike any other. He selected players for their distinctive voices, learned to downplay their weaknesses and emphasize their strengths, wrote to highlight them singly. . .and in various combinations.

--John Edward Hasse, Ellington biographer

Composed by Billy Strayhorn, *Take the A Train* was the theme song of Duke Ellington's band for many years. As you continue to listen to Duke Ellington's orchestra, you will begin to recognize the sounds of his key musicians, each of whom had distinctive ways of playing their instruments. The ensemble was divided into three sections: brass, reeds, and percussion.

The Brass Section: Trumpets

Photo: Cootie Williams playing the trumpet

Audio: *Concerto for Cootie*

My men and my race are the inspiration for my music.

--Duke Ellington

Cootie Williams was one of the great trumpet players in the Duke Ellington band. He was so outstanding that Duke Ellington wrote a composition especially for him, a showpiece titled *Concerto for Cootie*.

Activity: As you listen to *Concerto for Cootie*, list at least three different ways you hear him play the trumpet.

The Brass Section: Trombones

Photo: Joe Tricky Sam Nanton, Juan Tizol, and Lawrence Brown

In the brass section, the orchestra was famous for its trombone players. Three of the players were so good that they have been called God's Trombones. They were Joe Tricky Sam Nanton, Lawrence Brown, and Juan Tizol. Nanton and Brown played the most common type of trombone slide trombone, and Tizol played a valve trombone (it has three valves that you depress, as on a trumpet).

Audio: *Three Cent Stomp*

The first trombone player you will hear is Joe Tricky Sam Nanton. He was famous for the sounds he made on his instrument with a plunger mute, sounds such as growling sounds, yah-yah and wah-wah.

Audio: *Caravan*

The second outstanding trombonist was Juan Tizol, who was born in Puerto Rico. Always looking for something new, Ellington used Tizol's piece *Caravan* to bring new, Latin-American rhythms to his band.

Audio: *Do Nothin' till You Hear from Me*

Lawrence Brown, the third great trombonist, could play a wide range of notes, from high to low, on his instrument and played with a beautiful, singing tone.

Activity:

Each of the three *God's Trombones* players were famous for the distinctive sounds they made on their instruments. After listening to the three examples, write the name of the player whose sound fit the descriptions below and the name of the composition he played.

Descriptive Sound

- | | |
|----------------------------|------------------|
| 1. Latin rhythms. | Player_____ |
| | Composition_____ |
| 2. Smooth, beautiful tone. | Player_____ |
| | Composition_____ |
| 3. Use of plunger mute. | Player_____ |
| | Composition_____ |

The Reed Section: Saxophones

Photo: Johnny Hodges with Alto Saxophone

Audio: *Jeep's Blues*

Duke Ellington kept an all-star reed section of four or five great saxophones in his orchestra. Johnny Hodges was the outstanding alto saxophone player in the group, famous for the manner in which he would glide smoothly from note to note, creating a lush, romantic sound. Duke

Ellington wrote many songs for this master player, and featured him on a lot of the band's recordings. Many saxophone players wanted to sound like Johnny Hodges.

Activity: *Jeep's Blues* was a popular hit for Johnny Hodges. As you listen, write the words band, Hodges, and Ellington's piano whenever you hear their entrances in the song. Listen to *Jeep's Blues* again and write a sentence telling how you would recognize the sound of Johnny Hodges and his alto saxophone if you heard it in another song.

The Violin

Photo: Ray Nance playing violin

Audio: *C-Jam Blues*

Duke Ellington liked the sound of strings, and when Ray Nance joined the orchestra, Ellington used the violin on a regular basis. Nance was also an excellent trumpet player, dancer and singer. He had so many talents that Ellington nicknamed him Floor Show, meaning he could put on an entire show by himself! Ray Nance's violin added a distinctive sound to a jazz band.

Activity:

Write a sentence describing how you would use a violin in a jazz band: slow, fast, alone with the reed section, etc.

You have listened to players in the brass and reed section. Write about how you compare Ray Nance's violin playing with that of any of the other players you have heard.

Duke Ellington, the Pianist

Photos: Ellington at the Piano

Overall Audio: *The Single Petal of a Rose* [written in honor of Queen Elizabeth]

Duke Ellington was one of the finest pianists in all of jazz.

--Wynton Marsalis, trumpeter and composer

He was a great musician who used the piano to tell his story.

--Dempsey Travis, author

Audio: *Soda Fountain Rag*

Duke Ellington took piano lessons from the age of seven, but preferred sports and art until, as a teenager, he heard a boy his own age play the piano who was also a composer. Shortly thereafter Duke came down with a virus and had to stay inside his house. During this period, he made up his mind to become a composer, and spent hours playing the piano. He wrote his first composition, *Soda Fountain Rag*, when he was fifteen years old. It is in the style of stride piano, which was popular at that time. Stride piano features a left hand going back and forth on the piano keys (striding) while the right hand plays a lively melody. As you listen, can you hear the left hand of the piano striding over the keys?

Audio: *Sophisticated Lady*

Duke Ellington used the piano to teach himself to compose;
he would orchestrate [write for the instruments] what the left hand played.

--Gunther Schuller, composer and conductor

Duke Ellington used the piano in many ways. He would introduce the songs before the band would start to set the mood and the rhythm, or sometimes to call all the members of the band to the stage to get them ready to perform. His introductions could be long or short, but they were always just right for the song that was to be played. One of his most beautiful is the one used to introduce *Sophisticated Lady*, one of his most popular compositions.

Activity: Follow the introduction to *Sophisticated Lady* with the guide below: Count the seconds that elapse before the band enters.

Piano alone

String bass enters
Piano alone
Band enters

Audio: *I Got It Bad (and That Ain't Good)*

Duke Ellington was the greatest accompanist in the history of jazz;
he had a magical touch and never overplayed.

--Wynton Marsalis, trumpeter and composer

An accompanist provides the musical background for the person playing the main melody on an instrument, or for a solo singer. Duke Ellington knew how to provide the proper balance when he accompanied a performer. A good accompanist gives the soloist solid support and interesting contrast, and Duke Ellington was one of the best. Listen closely as he accompanies the great Louis Armstrong in his trumpet solo in *I Got It Bad and That Ain't Good*, an Ellington composition that was originally recorded with a singer. Listen closely to hear Duke Ellington's accompaniment beneath Louis Armstrong's solo.

Audio: *Pitter Panther Patter*

[Duke Ellington and Jimmie Blanton] are magnificent;
they react with restraint and [great] ability to play together.

--David Baker, conductor and educator

Playing a duet with another musician is different from being an accompanist. In a duet, both performers are equally important. In this famous duet with string bassist Jimmie Blanton, Ellington shows his skills as a pianist by creating melodies and rhythms that make the duet as interesting and satisfying as if the two men were an entire band.

Activity: Listen closely to the give and take or call and response between the piano and the string bass. Count how many times the main theme is played.

Audio: *Wigwise* (from *Money Jungle*)

Duke Ellington could hold his own with anybody.

--David Baker, conductor and educator

Duke Ellington played the piano and expected [Charlie] Mingus and [Max] Roach to fit in.
He didn't bring any music; [they] were to add whatever they heard.

--Billy Taylor

Money Jungle was the name of an album that Duke Ellington made with two of the greatest musicians in jazz: string bassist Charlie Mingus and drummer Max Roach. It was an unusual trio and it produced a kind of chamber music (a small ensemble with only one player playing each part or piece of written music). In the composition *Wigwise*, Duke Ellington shows his skills by giving each player time and space to play out his own musical ideas, while coming up with some great ideas of his own.

Listen closely! This is an excellent example of improvisation, when each musician makes up his own music as he plays. Improvisation is the most important part of jazz.

Activity: Count how many times each player has a solo:

Piano _____

String Bass _____

Drum _____

Audio: *New World A-Comin*

Duke Ellington had a deep-in-the-wood, deep-in-the-keys way of playing the piano.

[His playing] had a resonance that no one else got.

--John Edward Hasse, Ellington biographer

Duke Ellington was the musical anchor for his orchestra.

--Wynton Marsalis, trumpeter and composer

Duke Ellington was a pianist who excelled in the technique and variety of ways to play the piano. A person with this ability is called a piano virtuoso. He used his skills in many ways: to lead and inspire his band; to play solos; to accompany other soloists; to play with other instrumentalists in small ensembles. He was a great composer; a unique pianist; a one-of-a-kind musician, and a musical genius.

Listen closely to his *virtuoso* playing as he performs the introduction to *New World A-Comin*, one of his most original compositions.

Activity: List the compositions you have heard in the order you liked best. In a sentence or two, write what you liked best about the first three you name.