

Analysis of Duke Ellington' Ko-Ko

Duke Ellington (1899-1974) is one of the most unique players in the history of jazz, as he is more renowned for his compositional ability, rather than his improvisational skills. Ellington has produced over 1000 pieces, for everything ranging from film scores to church music. As he has composed such a diverse range of musical pieces, it is hard to pin point his music to one particular style or era of jazz. Ellington grew up in a middle class family in Washington D.C. he originally started playing music in family functions, and then he moved onto social and embassy functions. He also spent some time in New York in the 1920's where he began to play and write Broadway shows. By 1940 Ellington's band was thought as one of the most forward looking popular big bands of the American jazz circuit. In the 40's and 50's Ellington was playing all around America on predominantly one-night stands, to mainly white audiences. *Ko-ko* was originally written for his unperformed opera called *Boola*. This record lasts exactly 2 minutes 16 seconds, as Ellington was limited to a maximum of three minutes to each song. This was because all his songs were recorded on 78 RPM (revolutions per minute) and they only had a capacity of 3 minutes recording time. On this record, Ellington's national diversity in his band really comes through. His jazz has a universal sound due to the fact he had players from all over the world in his band. The piece is set in a crescendo form, which means that as each chorus goes on, it gets progressively louder and the texture of the piece becomes fuller. The song starts with the use of "jungle" drums, and there is the sound of the bass strings, being played by Jimmy Blanton, being rubbed after 4 bars. This may be a mistake made, or could be part of the intro as he repeats this effect again, after another 4 bars, and then this leads into the song. Just the song is about to start baritone saxophonist Harry Carney pulls off a small glissando, and then goes straight into a pedal in the note of Christ know cuz all the information I have doesn't say! Over this the trombonists Lawrence Brown, Joe Nanton and Juan Tizol play parallel triads, moving steadily through chromatic harmonies. This creates a feature that runs through out this piece. This is the use of antiphonal exchange, a kind of call and response technique, very popular in native African music. This again shows Ellington's love of jungle and African themed music. Then the piece moves on to Trombonist Juan Tizol repeatedly playing the notes Bb, Cb, G and F. This is an unusual sequence to play, as moving from Bb to Cb requires the trombonist to move the slide a distance of three feet. This could not be done without making a clumsy slur or an unintentional glissando. Juan Tizol's trombone was fitted with valves, which meant the instrument had a thinner tone than normal trombones, but he was able to produce short sharp notes, and also make jumps like Bb to Cb without making slurs or glissandos. Again the sax uses the antiphonal response technique, replying to Tizol's riff, a short riff of their own. This riff is transposed up a 4th when the chord changes from I to IV, but the trombone remains at the same pitch, thus preserving its modal quality. Then Trombonist Joe Nanton plays a small solo, which again uses antiphonal exchange. Joe Nanton plays his solo using a mute pressed hard against the end of his trombone, occasionally releasing the mute to give it a slight wah sound, with the constant brass punctuations created by the brass section by pressing and releasing the mutes on their instruments. This creates a du-wa du-wa sound. This is played through out Nanton's 2 choruses. In the second chorus, Nanton raises his dynamic, pitch and also holds the mute tighter to the end of his instrument. This effect makes the sound more muffled, but more intense, rising in the crescendo fashion. Then clarinetist Barney Bigard plays a solo in a very register, much higher than played before on this track. This opens the piece up, as the range is now much wider. Again this backed up by brass punctuations. This time there are two different effects by the brass instruments. It sounds as if the trumpets are playing 4 notes in triplets up the scale, and in turn they are being internally responded to by the trombone sliding down the scale, whilst releasing their mutes. So not only is the brass responding to the clarinet, they are also using antiphonal exchange within their own section. The next section contains all the instruments, with the sax playing low notes, and the rest of the instruments play high "fan fair" type notes. Then they all move up in register for one chord, and then back down. Then there is a small double bass solo played by Jimmy Blanton. The solo is played bar by bar, again in an antiphonal exchange. The Bass plays one bar of what sounds to be an improvised solo, which is then answered by the brass. Once again an improvised solo, then it is responded to by the clarinet and sax. Then one more bar of bass solo then all the instruments kick in again playing fan fair type chords, with the clarinet playing a very erratic and wide-ranged solo. Then the piece moves back into the beginning, with the use of the jungle drums and pedal point being played by the sax. This is known as the coda. As the song draws to a close all the instruments play sharp punching chords, gradually climbing up the scale until it finally reaches a high note, with all the instruments playing vibratos and other technical glissandos etc. Then the song finishes by all the instruments stopping together.