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MUSIC

## **MUSIC; Bridging the Worlds Of Broadway and Jazz, Outside the Limelight**

By BARRY SINGER

ORCHESTRATORS rarely receive marquee billing. Luther Henderson knows this as well as anyone. More than 25 Broadway musicals, a good many more television shows and untold numbers of club acts and recording sessions have used his distinctive talents for more than 50 years. Few ever acknowledged his name prominently. But that is the lot of the orchestrator-arranger who labors behind the scenes to construct instrumental settings that animate the music of others.

At 81, Mr. Henderson has worked with giants in the worlds of musical theater, American popular song and jazz; from Richard Rodgers to Jule Styne, Lena Horne to Duke Ellington. In doing so, he has bridged these worlds, particularly those of jazz and musical theater, as few others have.

On Thursday at Carnegie Hall, Mr. Henderson's billing for once will be bold-faced, as Simon Rattle leads the Orchestra of St. Luke's in an evening of Duke Ellington's music entirely re-orchestrated for symphonic performance by Mr. Henderson.

The evening promises to be quite elaborate musically, featuring a host of jazz luminaries, including the saxophonist Joe Lovano, the vocalist Dianne Reeves and the trumpeter Clark Terry. "It's my attempt to give Ellington a 'classical' presence with a 'jazzical' sensibility," Mr. Henderson said recently with characteristic whimsy, seated in the sun-filled living room of his midtown Manhattan duplex, where the walls are lined with artworks by Romare Beardon. "Any time you play Ellington, it can only sound like Ellington. He is his own context. I'm simply taking him on a tour of the classical domain via the symphony orchestra."

Mr. Henderson is spry, goateed and professorial with a reedy childlike voice. He is a forward-looking man with an incisive, though admittedly imperfect, memory, and his historical insights, particularly where Ellington is concerned, are often profound.

"What shows have I worked on?" he laughed, firing up a Macintosh computer in his expansive

work space two flights down from his apartment. "Heavens, I hardly remember them all. Let me print out a list."

The resume that comes out of the printer is astonishing: "Funny Girl," "Flower Drum Song," "Hallelujah, Baby!," "Do Re Mi" and "No, No, Nanette" (dance arrangements); "Ain't Misbehavin' " (orchestrator/arranger), "Jelly's Last Jam" (co-composer and arranger, adapting Jelly Roll Morton's original compositions). There are the Ed Sullivan, Red Skelton, Dean Martin, Carol Burnett, Victor Borge, Andy Williams and Ann Margret shows; there is "The Hollywood Palace" and "The Bell Telephone Hour."

And didn't Mr. Henderson also recently provide the dance arrangements for Harold Arlen's "St. Louis Woman" at City Center's Encores Series?

"Oh, yeah," he shrugged apologetically. "I guess this list isn't quite complete."

Mr. Henderson's spotlit turn at Carnegie Hall in Duke Ellington's company is, in fact, a return engagement that mitigates a painful memory. In 1955, the Ellington band was scheduled to make its debut performing with a symphony orchestra, The Symphony of the Air, at Carnegie Hall. Ellington engaged Henderson to re-orchestrate a few extended works for the occasion -- "Harlem," "New World A-Comin' " "Night Creature."

"He dubbed me his classical arm," Mr. Henderson recalled, back upstairs in the living room, with his wife of many years, Billie, hovering close by. "I had my Juilliard training. And he wanted me to legitimize him in this society we call classical musical. I didn't know that then. It's taken me 50 years to figure that out."

Mr. Henderson was devoted to Billy Strayhorn, Ellington's gifted and enigmatic collaborative alter-ego, who wrote "Take the A Train," among other Ellingtonian standards. "While Duke never ever took credit for 'A Train,' no one ever thought it was written by anyone other than Ellington either," Mr. Henderson said. "Well, I wanted to be sure I got credit for what I'd done. And Duke, he said to me: 'Yes, oh yes. Of course.' But when I went down to Carnegie before the concert to see if my name was in the program, it was not. I had to have inserts printed up: 'Symphonic orchestrations by Luther Henderson.' I didn't like him for that. Which was very hard on me. Because I loved the Duke."

His association with Ellington went back a very long way. Born in Kansas City, Mo., Mr. Henderson and his family moved to Harlem when he was 4. There he attended high school with Ellington's son Mercer. "We hung out together on the same street in Sugar Hill," recalled Mr. Henderson. "I knew his dad from the time I was 13."

After graduating from Juilliard in 1942, Mr. Henderson worked with the Leonard Ware trio at Kelly's Stable on the legendary hub of jazz in New York, 52nd Street. While in the Navy during

World War Two, he provided dance arrangements for the Ellington band. Upon his discharge, Mr. Henderson, with the help of Strayhorn, landed the job of musical director and arranger for Lena Horne.

It was at this time that Ellington also hired Mr. Henderson to write orchestrations for "Beggar's Holiday," the only Ellington musical destined to reach Broadway, and that only briefly in 1946. Two other Ellington efforts, "Jump for Joy" and "Queenie Pie," never did.

"Ellington was not willing to give up his Africanisms for Broadway," Mr. Henderson said. "No matter how suave and elegant he made himself, he never would surrender who he was."

And what were these Africanisms?

"The heartbeat and primal sounds of nature rooted in the African culture that are handed down by rote rather than written tradition. What were Bubber Miley and Tricky Sam Nanton and later Cootie Williams doing with their plungers and horns in Ellington's band? They were simply talking to each another. About the wind and the breeze. That's what the blues is."

Could this unwillingness to reshape his musical vision be the central reason Ellington failed as a Broadway composer? "Yes," Mr. Henderson responded.

In fact, Mr. Henderson says, Ellington rarely deigned even to be present during previews to work on his shows, as all other musical theater composers did. He delegated that responsibility to Mr. Strayhorn or to Mr. Henderson, a practice unheard of on Broadway.

"I was with Strayhorn working on 'Beggar's Holiday' when the show was previewing in New Haven," Mr. Henderson recalled. "We were in adjacent hotel rooms. Ellington was on the road with his band. He would never leave his band to work on a show. The band always came first. He and Strays would just talk every night on the phone. 'Yes, Edward,' I would hear. 'Yes, Edward.' And the next day there would be a new song."

"I've worked on many, many musicals since then," Mr. Henderson added. "But I've never again worked with an absentee composer."

Even within jazz, Mr. Henderson pointed out, Ellington's working method was unique.

"Ellington's genius," he said, "was knowing how to project himself through other people." Mr. Henderson likened this process to that of the West-African griot, or storyteller, who perpetuates the oral traditions of his family or village. "Ellington was actually a griot of African-American music. He heard things in others, collected their stories and retold them incorporated into himself, into his music. That's why his band and his bandsmen really were his instrument. He provided them a framework within this European culture into which his and their Africanisms were delivered. And everybody loved it."

Except Broadway. While there have been Broadway composers with "powerful jazz affinities," as Mr. Henderson noted, from Harold Arlen through Jule Styne and Leonard Bernstein to Cy Coleman, Broadway producers have been hesitant to gamble on genuine jazz artists, whether out of philistine conservatism or outright racism. For the few composers, like Ellington, however, who were given an opportunity, mastering the form proved elusive.

It is here that Mr. Henderson's contribution takes center stage. What Broadway has been terrifically hospitable to are the musical trappings of jazz: the swinging syncopation, the wailing saxophones, the brass, the blues. And the musicians responsible for bringing this jazz aspect to Broadway have not been composers like Ellington but arrangers and orchestrators like Luther Henderson. "Or Will Vodery and Ford Dabney, Eddie Sauter, Ralph Burns," Mr. Henderson added.

Vodery and Dabney, both of whom were black, brought an embryonic jazz sensibility to the Ziegfeld Follies when they were employed as orchestra leaders by Ziegfeld throughout the teens and 1920's. Sauter, of Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw band fame, ingeniously orchestrated many Broadway hits, including "The Apple Tree" and "1776." While Burns, an early colleague of Miles Davis, conceived orchestrations for Mr. Coleman's "Sweet Charity" and Kander and Ebb's "Chicago" (among many others) that stand as the quintessence of jazz and Broadway musical theater blended.

Functioning as both guides and interpreters, Mr. Henderson and the others remade the world of the Broadway musical. "You can't extemporize in the theater," Mr. Henderson said. "The whole thing would blow up. A jazz orchestrator, though -- white or black -- brings the mindset of primal African expression into the European camp."

Then why, almost alone among black orchestrators and composers, has only he been able to succeed on Broadway?

"You can't be a part of something you've never been exposed to," Mr. Henderson said. "My folks exposed me to everything. And they gave me the most critical Broadway experience I could have had. They took me in 1935 to see the first production of Gershwin's 'Porgy and Bess.' That really turned me around."

Many blacks chose to avoid Broadway shows rather than be relegated to the balcony under the de facto segregation that ruled in the 1930's. Moreover, black audiences were hardly admirers of Gershwin's "folk opera."

Mr. Henderson, unabashedly, was a fan then and remains one now. This receptiveness captures perfectly the middle ground he occupies between jazz and musical theater. "We are the inheritors in this country of two extraordinary 20th-century jazz geniuses," he said. "Ellington and Gershwin. And what's extraordinary about them is that they both ran on different motors:

Gershwin on a European motor, Ellington an African one."

But didn't Ellington despise "Porgy," dismissing its score for "Gershwin's lampblack Negroisms?"

Mr. Henderson smiled. "I'll bet 'Porgy' was unacceptable for Ellington purely because it was the European version. I too wish that Ellington had written the definitive black musical of the 20th century. But when you look back on it, it couldn't be so. Because they weren't his forms."

"Ellington was not steeped in European music. He needed somebody to help him. Musical theater is not steeped in Africanisms. It needs somebody to help it; help that ensures that neither will lose its identity. It's an ongoing thing, one long continuous continuum. And sometimes it can get you to Carnegie Hall."

Photos: Luther Henderson, left, and Simon Rattle discuss Duke Ellington's music. (Alan Woods)(pg. 31); The orchestrator Luther Henderson at his Manhattan apartment recently. (Bridget Besaw Gorman for The New York Times)(pg. 29)