

SYMPHONY REVIEW
The Duke Gets Under
The Symphony's Skin

June 10, 00

By Thomas Goss

Saturday's San Francisco Symphony concert at Davies Hall, part of its current American Mavericks series, was devoted to the music of Duke Ellington. It had me asking just how far you can stretch the meaning of the term "maverick." With this series, rebels of every stripe and decade are getting their share of concertgoer's ears, many deserved and long overdue. But to define Ellington as a maverick brings a new level of meaninglessness to the word.

A maverick, of course, is an unbranded piece of livestock. The connotation here is that a composer so designated is not a member of the common herd, having rebelled and refused to be labeled. Yet Ellington, in his sophistication and sense of presence, seems to have been above even the need to rebel to feel special. Quite the opposite, for he struggled like many other greats, such as Thomas "Fats" Waller, for the simple recognition of being an American Composer. The irony, of course, is that rivers of ink are now being spilled to prove that he was the greatest one we ever had. As last Saturday's concert showed, there is more than a scrap of truth to that assertion.

Ellington gets under your skin in a dozen different ways. He is like a pleasant itch, than a consuming fever. He knocks you cold, then massages your heart muscle to make sure you're still alive. He hits all the buttons, even the ones you didn't know you had. For the tuxedoed and gowned members of the San Francisco Symphony, the effect was more transformative than the effort of playing Varese's *Ameriques* a few weeks back. In order to interpret the wide variety of Ellington's art, the mechanics of the written score had to be transcended for the sake of the jazz between the notes.

Conductor and trumpeter extraordinaire Jon Faddis helped bridge the gap in disciplines and sensibilities with ease and distinction. From the first easy amble onstage to the precisely controlled fireworks his gestures brought forth in the tone-poem "Harlem" to the Icarian high notes of his impromptu soloing, he brought a sure hand and an assured manner to the task of orchestrally realizing a fertile and free music. I came away wondering more strongly than ever why masterpieces like *The Black and Tan Fantasy* are not performed right alongside *The Chairman Dances* and Beethoven's 5th.

Nights In The Gardens Of Harlem

Faddis was assisted immensely by Renee Rosnes, who assumed ducal duties at the piano throughout the concert. Sometimes bandleader, sometimes

accompanist, she showed outstanding mastery in the concert piece "New World a-Comin'," Duke's American answer to "Nights in the Gardens of Spain." She got it just right -- flashy yet not self-conscious, sensitive but not overindulgent. By using the jazz ensemble approach, the work achieved naturally the erasure of adversarial roles between orchestra and soloist that composers like de Falla and Ravel strove so mightily to accomplish.

The symphony broke down to a simple jazz combo for the second set to accompany the San Francisco Symphony Chorus in a performance of selections from Ellington's *Sacred Concerts*. Though the chorus performed beautifully, their role was marginalized somewhat by the overly simplistic writing of their parts and the dominance of the vocal soloists. Perhaps this work of all those performed that night was the most deserving of the dubious moniker "maverick," for its effortless contradictions if nothing else.

Absolutely reverent and spiritual it was, yet gospel music it was not. Though touches of gospel informed the character of the work, the overall style was an unforced spectrum of Ellington's natural style, bringing the music of the nightclub into the chapel. The most emotive song, "Heaven," to which soprano Priscilla Baskerville brought a sultry dazzle, was a sophisticated, slow torch song that opened out eventually into a mambo. "In the Beginning God" was music for both the intellect and the soul, instrumentally intricate, then touching as Milt Grayson stepped up to the mike with his huge, warm basso.

The concert came to a close with the hot-step, fervent-shout "Praise God and Dance." Damn! The first time I ever really felt like rolling in the aisles, and I was up in the second tier, where such behavior is potentially lethal. I stood up and clapped instead.