Waterbury Symphony Orchestra
LEIF BJALAND, MUSIC DIRECTOR & CONDUCTOR

Rhapsody in Jazz
A Study of Two Masters of Swing

Duke Ellington

George Gershwin

Presented in partnership with
Waterbury Arts Magnet School

American Jazz Pianist and Composer (1899 -1974)

Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington was an American composer, pianist, and jazz orchestra leader, who blazed a musical trail in an extraordinary and highly successful career spanning sixty years. He wrote over one thousand compositions, creating not only many jazz classics but also leaving the largest recorded personal jazz legacy in American history.

Born in Washington D.C. in 1899, Ellington's parents enrolled him in piano lessons at the age of seven. Even though he would have preferred to play baseball, his parents encouraged him to practice the piano every day. Ellington's mother also insisted her son use good manners and dress nicely. A friend nicknamed him "Duke" because his elegant manner and dapper dress gave him the character of a young aristocrat.

In the summer of 1914, Ellington wrote his first musical composition, *Soda Fountain Rag*, while working as a soda jerk. *Soda Fountain Rag* was written by ear, however, as he had not yet learned to write music. Ellington's high school music teacher gave him lessons in harmony. With additional tutoring from pianist and band leader Oliver "Doc" Perry, the young composer learned to read and write music, develop a professional style, and improve his technique.

Jazz musicians were in demand in New York, and by 1923 Ellington had moved there and formed his own band, which he named, The Washingtonians. Musicians and critics were noticing that Ellington's music was special, and four years later he was offered an engagement at Harlem's hottest jazz spot - The Cotton Club.
In 1943, Carnegie Hall hosted a concert series with the Duke Ellington and his big band, which had since become named, The Duke Ellington Orchestra. The concerts featured some of Ellington's extended compositions which were sometimes 45 minutes long. His compositions were so beautifully written that many people believed the orchestra was his instrument.

In 1969, President Nixon gave a party at The White House to celebrate Ellington's 70th birthday. Honoring his lifetime of achievement, Nixon presented Ellington the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Duke Ellington died on May 24, 1974, having established himself as one of the greatest jazz artists and composers of all-time. He is best remembered for his *Take the A Train* and *It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)*.

"The artist must say it without saying it."
Duke Ellington

In music, the term "swing" can mean many things. Generally, it is a style of jazz that grew from African American roots and dominated American popular music in what came to be known as the Swing Era (from approximately 1930 to 1945). Played by big bands led by such luminaries as Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Benny Goodman, and Artie Shaw, swing has a distinctive rhythmic feel.

It's been called *"the most debated word in jazz."* Even jazz legends have a hard time trying to explain it. Here's what some of them have to say:

Pianist Cootie Williams: *"Define it? I'd rather tackle Einstein's theory!"*

Clarinetist Bennie Goodman: *"It's free speech in music – the liberty a soloist has to stand and play a chorus the way they feel it."*

Trombonist Tommy Dorsey: *"Swing is sweet and hot at the same time and broad enough in its creative conception to meet every challenge tomorrow may present."*

Pianist Maurice Rocco: *"Swing is just a matter of personal opinion…"*

Pianist Fats Waller: *"Lady, if you gotta ask, you'll never know."*

What is Swing? Maybe the best answer is it's something you can feel in the music but you just can't quite explain it.

Click on the link below to hear Waterbury Symphony Orchestra Music Director & Conductor Leif Bjaland take a crack at explaining the concept of swing.

https://youtu.be/GoSZ8t_cZ4A

"It Don't Mean a Thing"

Ellington's popular song, "*It don't mean a Thing (if It Ain't Got That Swing),*" with lyrics by Irwin Mills, became a jazz standard almost instantly, and is particularly well known in the version recorded with the great Ella Fitzgerald.

Her syncopated and brilliant scatting on the refrain "Doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah," is an example of Ellington using a singer's voice to sound like an instrument. He also has instruments in the song "speaking" like people, through the use of mutes, glissandi and wawa sounds.
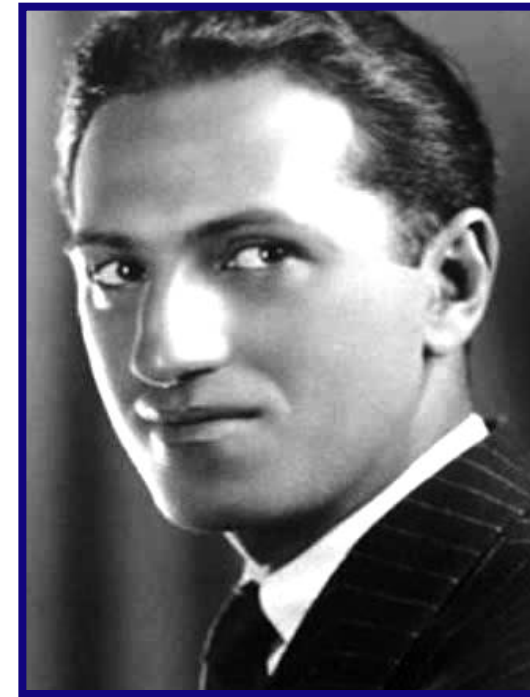
Use the link below to listen to Duke Ellington's *It Don't Mean a Thing (if it Ain't Got That Swing).*

https://youtu.be/myRc-3oF1d0

Meet George Gershwin

American Modern Era Composer and Pianist (1898-1937)

George Gershwin was an American composer, pianist and painter whose compositions spanned both popular and classical genres. George Gershwin was born as Jacob Gershowitz on September 26, 1898 in Brooklyn, New York. He was the second of four children born to Russian Jewish immigrant parents. His father changed the family name to Gershwin after immigrating from Russia.

Gershwin first displayed an interest in music at the age of ten when he attended his friend's violin recital in lower East Side Manhattan. His parents purchased a piano for his older brother Ira, but it was George who played it and he began his musical training at thirteen.

After trying various piano teachers for his first two years of study, Gershwin was introduced to Charles Hambitzer, the pianist with the Beethoven Symphony Orchestra. Hambitzer mentored his musical development until his death in 1918. Hambitzer taught Gershwin traditional piano technique, introduced him to the classical music of European composers, and encouraged him to attend orchestral concerts to hear their music.

By the age of fifteen Gershwin left school and began working in Tin Pan Alley's publishing district as a "song plugger". He first worked for the Remick publishing house in New York playing piano to boost sales for the company. Later he worked for the Harms publishing house where he earned thirty-five dollars a week writing songs. It was during this time that he began to receive commissions to write songs. Then, in 1924, Gershwin teamed up with his brother Ira, a lyricist, and began what would be a legendary career. Together they produced many of Broadway's hits including *Lady be Good*, *Strike Up the Band*, *Fascinating Rhythm* and *I Got Rhythm*. Gershwin won the Pulitzer Prize for *Of Thee I Sing* (1931) which was the first musical comedy to be awarded this honor. However, despite the honor it received, it was his *Rhapsody in Blue* which he wrote in 1924 that made him a star.

George Gershwin died on July 11, 1937 in Hollywood, California of a brain tumor. He was only 38 years old.

"Life is a lot like jazz. It's best when you improvise."
George Gershwin

"Rhapsody in Blue"

"George Gershwin is at work on a jazz concerto….." So went an article in the January 3, 1924 edition of The New York Tribune that discussed bandleader Paul Whiteman's "Experiment in Modern Music," a project that traced the history of jazz. The problem was that when the composer and pianist George Gershwin read the article the next morning, he had no idea why he was mentioned as he was not working on any concerto!

George Gershwin got his inspiration for *Rhapsody in Blue* while riding the train from New York to Boston, working on a show. Originally, titled "American Rhapsody" because it takes inspiration from many of the cultural traditions that make up the United States, Gershwin's brother later suggested "Rhapsody in Blue."

In the video below, Waterbury Symphony Orchestra Music Director & Conductor Leif Bjaland discusses the idea of *Rhapsody in Blue* as a musical manifestation of the American "melting pot."

https://youtu.be/uKZA5137dsU

"It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattle-ty bang that is often so stimulating to a composer . . . I frequently hear music in the very heart of noise. And then I suddenly heard—and even saw on paper—the complete construction of the rhapsody from beginning to end . . . I hear it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America—of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our metropolitan madness."

George Gershwin