

'Duke Ellington's Sacred Concert' marks 50th anniversary of a cultural milestone



Kerry Lengel, The Republic | azcentral.com 11:36 a.m. MST November 8, 2016



(Photo: (AP Photo/Frings))

It was one of those “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner” moments. Duke Ellington, jazz giant and one of the most famous black entertainers in the world, had been invited to present “A Concert of Sacred Music” at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. And to some, the thought of bringing the sound of the Cotton Club into an Episcopal church — not to mention the tap dancer — amounted to blasphemy.

It would be easy to chalk this up to simple racism. But the event was part of a yearlong festival to open the new cathedral in 1965, and the Ellington band wasn’t the only unorthodox choice of performers. Earlier that year, a jazz mass by pianist Vince Guaraldi, an Italian American, had prompted death threats, according to a 2015 story by the public-radio station KQED.

Phoenix Chorale: 'Duke Ellington's Sacred Concert'

When/where: 3 and 7:30 p.m.

Saturday, Nov. 12, at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, 100 W. Roosevelt St., Phoenix. 3 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 13, at Mesa Community College Performing Arts Center, 1520 S. Longmore.

Admission: \$13-\$32.

Details: 602-253-2224,
phoenixchorale.org
(<http://phoenixchorale.org>).

The sacred concert incorporated traditional choral music as well as African-American gospel and included a mix of new compositions and older pieces such as “Come Sunday.” Despite the consternation of musical conservatives, the event was immediately declared a triumph. Ellington took the music on tour around the country, and Phoenix’s turn came on Nov. 10, 1966, with a pair of concerts at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral.

The downtown church is now the home base of the Phoenix Chorale, an internationally acclaimed vocal ensemble led by maestro Charles Bruffy. They will mark the 50th anniversary of Ellington’s appearance with performances at Trinity on Saturday, Nov. 12, and at Mesa Community College on Sunday, Nov. 13.

“When I started with the Phoenix Chorale, it was known as the Phoenix Bach Choir back then, and on the wall was a poster that was advertising the sacred concert, and I thought, ‘Wow, what a cool thing for this church to have done way back when,’” Bruffy says. “And so I kind of put that on my bucket list.

“It seemed like it was so far in the future that I didn’t give it much thought, and here we are 17 years later, and it’s time.”

Bruffy put his two choirs — he also conducts the Kansas City Chorale in Missouri — on the map by essaying works by contemporary composers and by recording exquisitely nuanced readings of classical repertoire such as Rachmaninoff’s “All-Night Vigil,” for which he won his third Grammy Award earlier this year.

But Bruffy also has tackled folk music, from American to Chinese, and has sung with jazz choirs. His eclecticism reflects Ellington’s famous maxim that there are only two kinds of music: “Good music, and the other kind.”

The Phoenix Chorale will be joined by the MCC Performing Arts Center Jazz Ensemble, made up mostly of local pro players, for “Duke Ellington’s Sacred Concert.” The selections draw on three different programs that the Duke assembled between 1965 and 1973. These include a cappella numbers to be sung just as Ellington composed them as well as new arrangements.



“The score is kind of an interesting combination of genuine Western classical music and jazz at the same time,” Bruffy says. “I’m sure not knowing what kind of choir he was going to be able to work with, most of the music was originally written in unison or in octaves for the choir. But this version of it that we are doing is fully

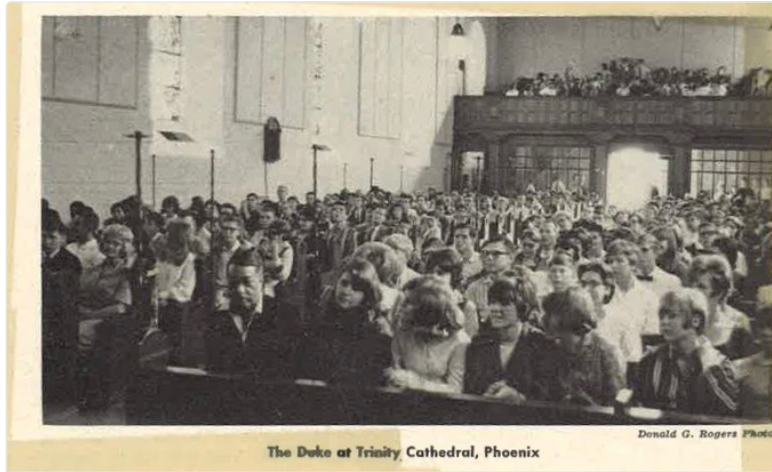


Duke Ellington (Photo: Publicity photo)

music was originally written in unison or in octaves for the choir. But this version of it that we are doing is fully fleshed out, and it has all kinds of jazz chords and interesting jazz rhythms.

“It is not at all a re-creation. It’s a celebration and an honoring of Duke Ellington and the history that we have with American jazz.”

If Ellington’s sacred music was controversial in San Francisco a half-century ago, it should be no surprise that it was in Arizona too. This despite the fact that the program for the 1966 concert lists among the “patrons” of the event such local luminaries as Sen. Barry Goldwater and future governor Jack Williams.



Phoenix Chorale
@phoenixchorale



#TBT Can you spot 'The Duke'? At @azcathedral on Nov 12, 1966 hearing local band P-Nut Butter! Read more >
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Richard Usher was 16 when his father, the Right Reverend Bradbury Usher, dean of Trinity Cathedral, invited Ellington to perform. Previously from Detroit, he had led the congregation for less than two years and had already raised eyebrows by speaking out on civil rights.

“My dad was protective of confidence and things of that nature and certainly not broadcasting some of the things that people said, because he always believed in people’s ability to grow and to get better vision and appreciate things over time,” Usher says.

“But we had a very prominent woman who was the wife of one of the vestrymen who happened to be from the South and was not inclined to accept diversity. And she told my dad that he had ruined her church experience that he had let a ‘Negro’ sing in her church and she would never be back. That wasn’t common, but there was some stress. ... There were people who left.”

However, what backlash there was does not seem to have been public. After all, the civil-rights movement had just scored one of its biggest victories with the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and Ellington was a huge star whose orchestra performed for audiences around the world.

The concert got a positive review in the next day’s *Arizona Republic*. And for Usher, it left memories to last a lifetime. He helped set up for the performance and got to meet Ellington before the show.

Nothing Incongruous About This Jazz in a Cathedral

By WILLIAM L. DOUDNA

Jazz in a cathedral, tap-dancing in a sanctuary—these sound incongruous.

But two audiences found last night that they weren't.

For the sincerity of Duke Ellington and the quality of his music-making made one believe in his thesis for these sacred concerts in Trinity Cathedral: that, in the tradition of the legendary juggler of Notre Dame, one may worship God by giving the best of his talent.

UNSTATED, but nevertheless implicit in the program and in Ellington's handling of it, was another tenet: that there is a joy in worship which can express one's reverence.

If there was anything incongruous about the concert and its setting, it was the applause—spontaneous and inevitable, yet to some ears somewhat out of place.

Most of the music was Ellington's own. None was religious music in the traditional sense, but all had a connotation of belief and of worship.

WHEN ONE says "Ellington's own," he means it, for the Duke's compositions are highly individual, peculiarly his, and seldom if ever reminiscent of any other writer.

The concert also included the first performance of "Go, Labor On!" a jazz work by William Fairfield Brown, the cathedral's minister of music, which was dedicated to Ellington. It was an adventure in atonality, disturbing and exciting, and powerful in its total effect.

day." Then came the Duke's remarkable "Black, Brown and Beige" overture, familiar to most listeners but worth hearing again and again, especially as its dynamic music hurried to the climax.

NEAR THE end, Ellington presented Bunny Briggs, a sensational dancer who did a marathon tap with steps so rapid and varied they would challenge a snare-drum expert. And the audience gave him the heartiest applause of the evening.

The band included some of the all-time greats of jazz, and with it was a corps of fine vocalists: Tony Watkins, with a round and vivid baritone; Esther Marrow,

with an infectious style and personality, and Jimmy McPhail, a persuasive man with lyrics as well as melody.

Highlights among the instrumental solos were Jimmy Hamilton's brilliant clarinet cadenza in "In the Beginning God"; William ("C a t") Anderson's wide-ranging trumpet, with perhaps the highest notes you'll hear from that instrument, and the virtuoso work of Paul Gonzales and Johnny Hodges on saxophones and Lawrence Brown on trombone.

Ellington also will present a jazz concert at 8:30 o'clock tonight in the Phoenix Star Theater.

The Cathedral Choir opened the program with "Come Sun-

"The concert itself was a dressy event," he says. "A lot of buildup to it. It was certainly extremely important to my father, and he was the kind of guy who would sweat the details of things of that nature. ...

"Everybody was moved. It was a very uplifting experience. My father was extremely pleased with how it had come off."

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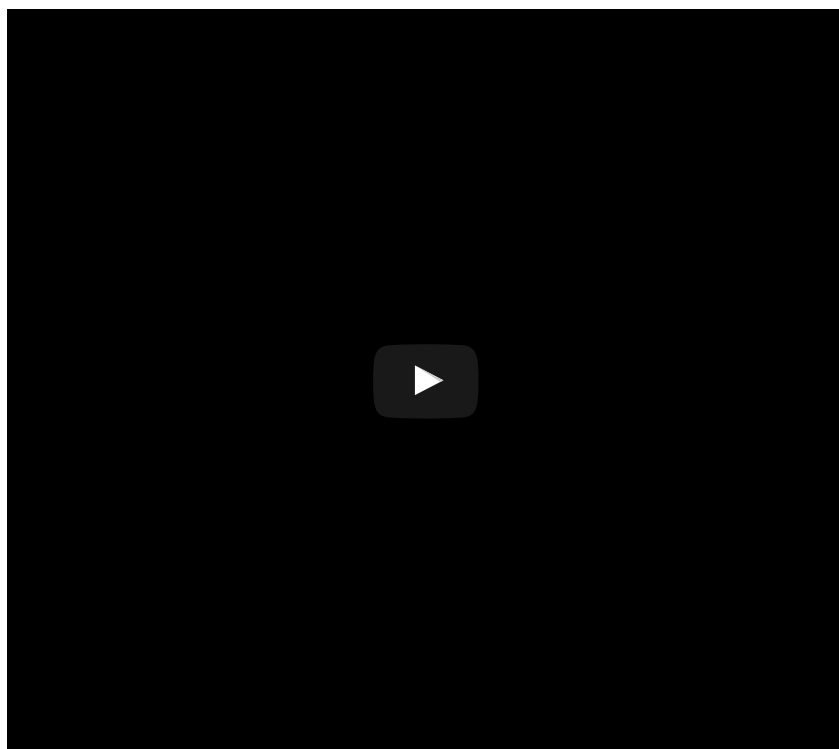
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Vehicle shown is a 2016 BMW 340i Sedan.