Ellington’s Adventure

In studying the influence of Latin American, African and Asian music on modern American composers, music historians tend to discuss such figures as Aaron Copeland, George Gershwin, Henry Cowell, Alan Hovhaness, and John Cage (Brindle; Griffith 104-39; Hitchcock 171-98). They usually overlook Duke Ellington, whom Gunther rightly calls “one of America’s great composers” (318), probably because they are familiar only with Ellington’s popular pieces, like “Sophisticated Lady” and “Moon Indigo.” Still little known are the ambitious orchestral suites Ellington composed, such as Black, Brown and Beige and The Liberian Suite, explore his impress of the people, places and music of other countries.

Not all music critics, however, have ignored Ellington’s excursions into longer musical forms. Raymond Horricks compared him with Ravel, Delius, and Debussy stating “The continually enquiring mind of Ellington…has sought to extend steadily the imaginative boundaries of the musical form on which it subsists: (122-123). Further, Horricks raised various