

Duke Ellington 2.1

Take the 'A' Train (1941)



Duke Ellington



Billy Strayhorn

In 1940 the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) raised its licensing fees meaning many members, including Ellington, could no longer play their compositions over radio. Ellington turned to Billy Strayhorn and son Mercer Ellington, who were registered with ASCAP competitor BMI to "write a whole new book for the band" Mercer recalled. *Take the A train* was one of these new compositions. Mercer recalls he had to rescue it from the trash can as Strayhorn discarded it as he felt it sounded too much like a Fletcher Henderson Arrangement! The title *Take the 'A' Train* refers to a subway line that runs to the Jazz district in NY. These were also the directions given to Strayhorn by Ellington to get to his house following a job offer. The piece was to become their signature tune in the 1940s.

Analysis-Take the 'A' Train

Instrumentation/Orchestration:



Ellington's **Big Band** comprised of 15 members:

5 reeds (x2 Alto sax, x2 Tenor sax, Baritone sax. Doubled on clarinets)

3 trumpets

3 trombones

4 rhythm section (piano, drums, bass, guitar).

Ellington was pianist, conductor and composer.

Ellington's orchestra was the archetypal sound of the 1930s Big band. The technique developed by **Fletcher Henderson** in the 1920s and 1930s, described by leading Jazz journalist Leonard Feather as "pitting of reed against brass section, and the use of forthright, swinging block voiced passages" was brought to fruition by Ellington's big band. Ellington had a vivid aural imagination and pushed the boundaries of orchestration and Jazz composition.

Below we can see an example of Ellington's treatment of the ensemble using 3-5 part **homophonic block voicings** in each section. Each section is then interwoven in a **polyphonic** manner

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Ko-Ko

The image shows a musical score for the piece "Ko-Ko" by Duke Ellington. The score is arranged in a standard big band format with the following parts from top to bottom: Alto (two staves), Clarinet, Tenor, Bari (Baritone), Tpt. 1 (Trumpet 1), Tpt. 2 (Trumpet 2), Tpt. 3 (Trumpet 3), Tbn. 1 (Trombone 1), Tbn. 2 (Trombone 2), Tbn. 3 (Trombone 3), and Gtr. (Guitar). The score is in 4/4 time and features a key signature of two flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor). The saxophone section (Alto, Clarinet, Tenor, Bari) is annotated with a purple double-headed arrow and a box labeled "5-part sax voicing". The trumpet section (Tpt. 1, 2, 3) is annotated with a red double-headed arrow and a box labeled "3-part Trumpet voicing". The trombone section (Tbn. 1, 2, 3) is annotated with an orange double-headed arrow and a box labeled "3-part Trombone voicing". A light blue arrow points from the text "Sections 'pitted against each other'" to the interaction between the saxophone and brass sections. The score includes dynamic markings such as *fp* (fortissimo piano) and *f* (forte). The guitar part at the bottom includes chord changes to Abm7 and Eb, and Bb7-9.

With the aid of arranging supremo Billy Strayhorn, *Take the A Train* is an example of Ellington's mature style. It contains sophisticated orchestrations of the sections interwoven in imaginative, rhythmic and considered ways. Many different timbres are explored throughout, such as the first tenor switching to clarinet for a different sectional timbre and the use of plunger mutes in the brass. Furthermore, sounds of the subway are cleverly evoked throughout in the arrangement producing inventive dissonant train like sounds.

Structure:

Take the A train is a **simple 32 bar AABA** tune in C major.

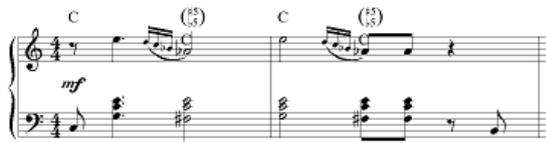
It is arranged in the following way:

Intro		4 bar piano intro-drums lightly accompany
32 -Bar AABA head	A	C major Simple unison Sax melody. Trombone and trumpet sections play off each other in block voiced homophonic countermelodies/stabs.
	A	ditto
	B	Saxes continue unison melody, only trombones provide rhythmic interjections.
	A	Unison Sax melody, this time the trumpets and trombones play homophonic together.
Trumpet solo with mute	A	Muted trumpet solo , accompanied by sophisticated 'velvety' reed writing. 1 st tenor switches to clarinet for a different sectional timbre.
	A	ditto
	B	More sustained notes used in the reeds
	A	Back to sophisticated, rich reed backing.
4 bar link Modulates to Eb Major		G7(#5) chord, trumpets on root, saxes 5 note chromatic descent root to #5. Goes up chromatically: G7(#5), Ab7(#5), A7(#5), Bb7#5 ready for the modulation into Eb major 
24 -Bar AAB Trumpet solo continues	A	Eb major- Mute is removed from the trumpet, solo continues. Clarinet swapped back to 1 st tenor. New rich saxophone backings featuring sustained notes and descending triplets.
	A	ditto
	B	Trombones also supply blocked voiced interjections. B section end with a dissonant Bb13(b9) orchestrated antiphonally around the orchestra recreating dissonant subway sounds.
32 -Bar AABA head	A	Eb Major Simple unison Sax melody. Trumpets and trombones combine and play block voiced homophonic rhythmic interjections/stabs.
	A	Ditto, dynamic decreases, brass use plunger mutes.
	A	Repeat, this time piece ends with classic root, down to 3 rd , 4 th , #4, 5 th , 6 th 7 th back to root jazz ending. Piece end on Eb6 chord

This version is edited to **3 minutes** so it would fit on a **10" 78rpm record** which was standard for popular music at the time. The live version would have been somewhat longer.

Texture:

Nearly every single texture is explored in this piece. The piece opens with solo piano featuring leader Duke Ellington; A whole tone **monophonic** descending run in his right hand accompanied by **homophonic chords** in his left.



The AABA head then resumes with the saxes playing the melody in **unison** with intricate stabs provided by the trombone and trumpet sections playing block voiced **homophonic** interjections. The rhythm section is also present with a swing beat on the drums, walking bass line and **comping** from the piano and guitar. The trumpets tacet in the B section before the repeat of A, where they return this time playing with the trombones for a fuller brass sound.

The trumpet solo is accompanied by woodwind and trombone **homophonic** block voiced interjections. The trumpet solo ends with a **dissonant Bb13(#9) chord** arranged **antiphonally** around the orchestra to create subway like effect.

The tune returns, again using a **monophonic texture**, with the trumpets and trombones providing **homophonic** rhythmic stabs and countermelodies

Harmony and Tonality:

Fairly simple harmonically. The tune begins in **C major** 32 bars followed by a 32 bar trumpet solo over the same chord progression. There is **4 bar link modulating to Eb major** after which the trumpet solo continues over only **AAB** of the tune. This ends with a **Bb13(#9)** before the tune is recapped in **Eb**, this time only playing section A three times, decreasing in volume each time.

The solo piano opening is based on the first two chords of the piece: **C/E to D 9^(#5)/F#**. The second is rather dissonant. The chord progression allows the **whole-tone scale** to be used on top.

The Harmony is **mainly diatonic**, with strong use of the **Secondary Dominant chord D7 (V of V)**. As with most jazz tunes, there is heavy use of **II-V-I progressions** and **Tri-tone Substitutions**.

Melody:

The interval of a **6th** features heavily in the melody. The opening 2 bars of the melody in the A section is **triadic** based on the C major chord. Bar 3 then uses a dissonant **descending minor 6th** moving from the 9th to the b5 (E-G#). Bar 6 is chromatic, featuring b3 blue notes, with the phrase ended with **ascending 6th** immediately followed by a **descending 6th**.

The melody in the first 4 bars of the B section outlines the **Fmaj7 chord**. The next 4 bars is a repeat, this time using an F# to match the chord of D7.

Although the **head melody is voiced in simple unison in the saxes**, providing clarity, this is contrasted **richly blocked voiced countermelodies** and rhythmic interjections from the brass. Saxes then provide richly blocked voiced countermelodies during the trumpet solo.

Rhythm and Metre:

The tune is a foxtrot; a 4/4 ballroom dance usually danced to a big-band. It uses swung quavers and the tempo remains constant.

Cross rhythms are used in the link section, implying a 3/4-time over the actual 4/4 metre.

The melody is moderately syncopated, so it is still easy to dance to, but the countermelodies and interjections are highly rhythmic and syncopated to maintain interest.

Dynamics:

Primarily a dance tune designed for the ballroom, there is little use of pianissimo for obvious reasons. **Fortissimo** is used in the middle of the trumpet solo during dissonant link section where it modulates, as well as at the end of the trumpet solo. This recreates subway warning sounds or that of a train coming to a halt. The second half of the trumpet solo is played at full volume **fortissimo** and performed with the mute removed.

The piece end with a gradual diminuendo with plunger mutes used by the brass.

Exam Style Questions:

1. What is the melodic range of this piece?

2. Describe the opening 4 bars of this piece:

3. What is a secondary dominant chord and how does it function?

4. What is a secondary dominant chord?

5. Discuss ways whole tones and whole-tone scales are used in this piece:

6. Discuss ways whole chromaticisms are used in this piece:

