

# Nnenna Freelon & Harolyn Blackwell

## *Ellington Voices: Classical to Jazz*

Thursday, April 30, 2009

Grades 7-12

11 a.m.-12 p.m. ET



Duke Ellington

### **Duke Ellington, The Man Behind the Music**

Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington (1899–1974) had a career as a composer, pianist, and bandleader that spanned more than 50 years, during which he created nearly 2,000 compositions and appeared in more than 20,000 performances around the world.

Born to musical parents, Ellington grew up in a house filled with the sound of popular songs. At the age of seven, he began taking piano lessons but soon after, his formal training ended as he became more interested in visual arts and decided to study commercial art at the Armstrong Manual Training School. By 14, his exposure to ragtime music drew him to jazz and a desire to become a professional musician. Ellington began composing music and playing in ensembles throughout his hometown of Washington, D.C. Before long, Ellington formed his own group, The Duke’s Serenaders, and the band began playing in both the black and white community.

Having had much success in Washington, the young Ellington moved to New York City, where after a rocky start, he found work playing in both theater orchestras and jazz bands. He soon became the bandleader of a small jazz band, but his need to push musical boundaries quickly grew his band into an orchestra. It wasn’t long before Ellington’s orchestra hit the stage at Harlem’s famous Cotton Club, New York’s most prestigious nightclub. Duke began appearing in motion pictures and was broadcast frequently on the radio, which brought the musician worldwide recognition. Continuing to break through racial barriers, Ellington and his orchestra performed in hotels and theaters once barred to blacks and even toured the world, becoming a cultural ambassador for the State Department.

Even today, Ellington’s music is a study of contrasts — dramatic and personal, traditional and innovative, strictly composed and loosely improvised — music that was often based on a highly personal memory, mood, or image.

### **His Music**

Duke Ellington had a versatile style of music that was all his own. From the jungle music of the Cotton Club to the swing played on the dance floor, Ellington’s music goes beyond the category of jazz. Ellington was known for showcasing the talent of his band members and wrote entire songs for individual players. He was also experimental, always pushing boundaries and constantly reinventing himself as a musician.

## Voices Carry

Jazz singing developed in the early twentieth century, largely pioneered by Louis Armstrong, who introduced improvisation and “scatting,” a singing style where nonsense syllables are used instead of words, and the voice is used much like a musical instrument. As record players became widespread among listeners, talented jazz singers gained popularity and became celebrities, including many female artists.

## Meet the Vocalists

### Harolyn Blackwell

Encouraged by her elementary school music teacher, Harolyn Blackwell began voice and piano lessons at age ten. Blackwell was trained in classical vocal performance and after graduating from college, the Washington, D.C. native began her Broadway career in Leonard Bernstein’s *West Side Story*. Her career soon changed directions when she was selected as a finalist for the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and she began studying opera. Since then, Blackwell has appeared on concert stages around the world, performing with major national and international opera companies, including the Metropolitan Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Teatro Colon de Buenos Aires, and Opera de Nice.



Harolyn Blackwell



Nnenna Freelon

### Nnenna Freelon

Nnenna Freelon discovered her passion for music at age seven when she sang her first solo at church. Freelon was introduced to jazz music through her parents’ record collection, which included albums by Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughn. Freelon graduated from Simmons College in Boston with a degree in health care administration but it was not until much later in her life that she pursued a musical career. After raising three children and working in the health care industry, she decided to become a jazz singer and has since produced 11 albums which have earned her 5 Grammy Award® nominations. Freelon has performed and toured with such top jazz artists as Ray Charles, Ellis Marsalis, Aretha Franklin, Diana Krall, Clark Terry, Herbie Hancock, Terence Blanchard, and Ramsey Lewis.

## About the Program

In this Kennedy Center commission, two of today’s top vocalists explore how classical sounds intertwine with improvisational jazz in the music of Duke Ellington, one of DC’s native sons. Bringing together their respective expertise from the jazz and classical worlds, Nnenna Freelon and Harolyn Blackwell demonstrate how Ellington’s compositions blended European classical traditions with syncopated rhythms and African American work songs, blues, and spiritual music.

## **Instructional Activity**

### **Making a Song Your Own**

Listen to the recordings of a particular jazz standard as performed by Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan (such as “Embraceable You,” written by George Gershwin). How does each singer’s interpretation of the song differ? How are they similar?

## **Resources**

For more information, connect to:

### **Internet Resources**

Bring the world of Duke Ellington alive

<http://dellington.org>

**Explore the musical partnership between Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn**

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/documentsgallery/>

**Duke Ellington: A Great American Musician and Composer**

<http://www.smithsonianjazz.org>

**Check out the interactive timeline exploring the history of jazz**

<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/jazzintime>

**Take an audio tour of D.C.’s jazz history with Dr. Billy Taylor and Frank Wess**

<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/jazzindc>

