

Three Black Kings

Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington (1899–1974)

Completed by Mercer Ellington (1919–1996)

Written: 1973–1974

Movements: Three

Style: Contemporary

Duration: Eighteen minutes

In 1965, Duke Ellington received a commission to present a sacred concert for the consecration of the Episcopal cathedral in San Francisco. For Ellington, it was "the most important thing I've done." In *Music is My Mistress* (his autobiography), Ellington writes, "Now I can say openly, what I have been saying to myself on my knees. . . . Some people ask me what prompted me to write the music for the sacred concerts. I have done so not as a matter of career, but in response to a growing understanding of my own vocation I think of myself as a messenger boy, one who tries to bring messages to people, not people who have never heard of God, but those who were more or less raised with the guidance of the Church."

In 1969 and again in 1973, Ellington presented his *Sacred Concerts* in Europe. The Basilica de Santa Maria del Mar in Barcelona was one of the stops on the tour. One of the stained glass windows there inspired Ellington to write a ballet. Ellington's son Mercer described what happened next:

My father first intended it as a eulogy for Martin Luther King, but then decided to go back into myth and history to include other black kings. The opening movement represents Balthazar, the black king of the Magi. King Solomon is next, with the song of jazz and perfume and dancing girls and all that, then the dirge for Dr. King.

Duke Ellington never lived long enough to complete *The Three Black Kings*. (He actually gave it a French title—*Trois Noirs Rois*—much more poetic.) "As he lay in hospital, Pop finally began to think in terms of posterity," Mercer recalled. "*The Three Black Kings* was a subject he and I discussed often, and he explained to me how it was to be played and how certain parts were to be orchestrated." Mercer completed the work, Luther Henderson orchestrated it, and Alvin Ailey staged it at Lincoln Center two years later.

Mercer claimed that his father always wrote how he felt: "The happy tunes were written during happy days, and the sad things were written when he was feeling sad. . . the Sacred Concerts expressed spiritual beliefs, and his feeling about the racial struggle was expressed in *The Three Black Kings*."

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New Morning for the World, "Daybreak of Freedom"

Joseph Schwantner (1943–)

Written: 1982

Movements: One

Style: Contemporary American

Duration: 25 minutes

The idea of setting text with music is obviously not new. In fact, anthropologists would argue that it is this very idea of communicating a text effectively that gave birth to music in the

first place. The eloquent marriage of words and music transcends the ability of either art to communicate. In song writing, the composer speaks to what the poet is singing, creating a new message that poetry or melody alone cannot suggest.

With this in mind, it is easy to understand why Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Joseph Schwantner was so excited when he was commissioned in 1982 by the Eastman School of Music and AT&T to write a piece honoring the great civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King. The composer writes

I was excited by the opportunity to engage my work with the profound and deeply felt works of Dr. King, a man of great dignity and courage whom I had long admired. The words that I selected for the narration were garnered from a variety of Dr. King's writings, addresses and speeches, and drawn from a period of over two decades of his life. These words, eloquently expressed by the thrust of his impassioned rhetoric and compelling oratory, bear witness to the power and nobility of Martin Luther King's ideas, principles, and beliefs. This work of celebrations is humbly dedicated to his memory.

Prior to my beginning the actual composing of *New Morning*, I spent the summer of 1982 examining King's work and assembling texts from a variety of his writings, addresses, and speeches—all drawn from a period of more than a decade of his life. This research helped me create and further illuminate the formal musical design of *New Morning for the World*. It was through this culling of a large amount of material that I was able to synthesize the text into a coherent narrative that encapsulates King's main ideas and beliefs.

In the manner of Aaron Copland's *Lincoln Portrait*, Schwantner's *New Morning for the World* offers a straightforward presentation of the text. The words are extracted from some of Dr. King's most stirring published writings: "Stride Toward Freedom" (1958), "Behind the Selma March" (1965), "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (1953), and "I Have a Dream" (1963). The music is also direct and straightforward. It inspires us to examine ourselves in the light of our history. Rather than mourning Dr. King's assassination, the piece is an optimistic call to action, challenging us to look beyond what we see toward what we as a nation could become, challenging us to continue, with courage and conviction, in the face of adversity and even death.

Joseph Schwantner was born in Chicago and played tuba in his high school orchestra. He got his musical training at the American Conservatory in Chicago and at Northwestern University, and has been on the music faculties at Eastman, Yale, and Juilliard. His compositions have received numerous prizes including a Pulitzer Prize (1979) for his *Aftertones of Infinity*; a Kennedy Center Friedheim Awards First Prize for *Music of Amber* and a Kennedy Center Friedheim Awards Third Prize for *A Sudden Rainbow*.

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Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op. 55, "Eroica"

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Written: 1802–04

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: 47 minutes

When music teachers try to make sense of the complex history of music so that students can take multiple-choice exams, they frequently make the year 1800 as the dividing line between the "classical" and "romantic" eras of music. It is a handy date, and easy to remember. However, the "classical" composer Franz Joseph Haydn was still going at that time and there were intimations of romanticism long before the turn of the century. 1800 does line up, however, with an important change in Beethoven's style: away from the classicism of his youth and toward something really quite new and remarkable. The signature piece of that change was his *Third Symphony*.

Of course, there were other things happening at about that time which marked a dramatic shift in thinking. Revolutionary fervor was successful in America in the 1770's and 80's. But it was running amok in Europe. Heads were rolling in France by 1792. Napoleon Bonaparte, first only a general, then part of a consulate, then "First Consul for Life," and finally Emperor declared, "I alone represent the People." The last vestiges of the Holy Roman Empire, now centered in Vienna, were crumbling before Napoleon's advance. Beethoven, living in Vienna, considered himself the equal of any aristocrat, even Napoleon. He declared, "it is a pity that I don't understand the art of war as well as that of music. I would destroy him!"

Three works that Beethoven wrote at about the same time show his progression in style. They all use the same melodic theme. He wrote a ballet in 1801 called the *Creatures of Prometheus*. In it, the god Prometheus brings two statues to life, but they are not fully human. It is only through their exposure to the arts that they are taught morality and emotion. For the final dance scene, Beethoven used a little country-dance melody. The next year he wrote an entire set of piano variations based upon that little tune. He declared to his publisher that the variations were in a *new manner*. Beethoven used the country-dance melody once again, this time as the theme for the final movement of his *Third Symphony*. He initially dedicated the work to Napoleon, but upon hearing of his self-elevation to emperor, Beethoven remarked: "So he too is nothing more than an ordinary man. Now he will also trample all human rights underfoot, and only pander to his own ambition; he will place himself above everyone else and become a tyrant." With that, he removed the dedication from the title page with a knife.

The *Eroica* symphony really is a new approach to writing music. Now, a symphony is no longer a collection of loosely related movements. They are connected by some underlying and often ineffable theme. In other words, the symphony *means something*. The first movement of the *Eroica*, while written in a traditional form, is longer and has more dramatic contrast than virtually any other symphony by Mozart or Haydn. The second movement has a simple plan. It is a slow march with a contrasting middle section—a profound treatment of a funeral march! The third movement, a rollicking scherzo, has a trio section that expects heroism on the part of the horn section. The final movement, based upon the Promethean theme, takes the concept of theme and variations beyond any previous symphonic treatment. Taken as a whole, Beethoven's *Third Symphony* is a musical picture, a "heroic symphony . . . composed to celebrate the memory of a great man."

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