QuickSheets
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PRESBYTERIAN ASSOCIATION OF MUSICIANS
Office of Christian Formation

Come Sunday: Duke Ellington in Worship

Practical Ideas for Introducing Ellington's Sacred Music in Congregational Life

Duke Ellington is widely recognized as one of America's greatest composers. Less familiar to many church musicians are his Sacred Concerts, composed between 1965 and 1973. These works combine jazz, spirituals, scripture, dance, and Christian theology into a uniquely American expression of faith.

Introducing Ellington's sacred music into worship can feel intimidating. Many congregations lack jazz ensembles or musicians experienced in improvisation. Yet Ellington's music can be incorporated successfully without presenting an entire Sacred Concert. A single hymn, solo, anthem, or instrumental selection can provide a meaningful starting point.

The goal is not to recreate a concert performance, but to allow Ellington's music to serve worship in ways that support prayer, proclamation, and congregational reflection.

Start with "Come Sunday"

"Come Sunday" remains the most accessible entry point into Ellington's sacred music. The piece is available in The United Methodist Hymnal (#728) and exists in numerous arrangements for solo voice, choir, and instrumental ensembles.

Consider using "Come Sunday" as:

- Communion music
- A hymn of response
- A vocal solo
- A choir anthem
- A prelude or offertory
- A service focused on hope, justice, or reconciliation

Begin simply. A soloist and pianist can be just as effective as a larger ensemble.

Let the Choir Lead

Choirs often provide the best avenue for introducing unfamiliar musical styles.

Helpful approaches include:

- Share recordings before rehearsals.
- Discuss the text before learning notes.
- Connect the music to scripture and worship themes.
- Include brief historical context in the bulletin.

Suggested repertoire:

- "Come Sunday"
- "Heaven"
- "The Lord's Prayer"

Match the Music to Your Resources

Ellington's sacred music can be adapted to a variety of congregational settings.

Solo Voice and Piano
Ideal for introducing the repertoire with minimal rehearsal.

Choir and Piano
Allows congregations to encounter the music through trusted leaders.

Small Ensemble
Piano, bass, drums, guitar, saxophone, or trumpet can provide stylistic support without requiring a full jazz orchestra.

Instrumental Music
Many melodies work well as preludes, offertories, and postludes.

Tell the Story

Congregations are more likely to embrace unfamiliar music when they understand its purpose.

Consider sharing:

- Ellington regarded the Sacred Concerts as his most important compositions.
- The music combines jazz traditions with Christian faith.
- Themes include prayer, hope, justice, dignity, and joy.

Keep explanations brief and connected to worship.

Think Beyond Worship

Ellington's sacred music can also support:

- Adult education classes
- Listening sessions
- Sacred arts festivals
- Jazz vespers
- Ecumenical events
- Community concerts

These settings often provide opportunities for deeper exploration before introducing larger works in worship.

Additional Resources

Come Sunday: Duke Ellington in Worship
https://claywhittingtonmusic.com/duke/

Resources include:

- Listening playlists
- Recommended recordings
- Choral octavos
- Solo literature
- Hymnal references
- Books and articles for further study

Recommended Listening

- First Sacred Concert (1965)
- Second Sacred Concert (1968)
- Third Sacred Concert (1973)

Recommended Reading

- *Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington* (John Edward Hasse)
- *The Duke Ellington Reader* (Mark Tucker, editor)

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