

A MOST ELEGANT ART

by Ian Muldoon*

Mike Nock calls “jazz” a much misunderstood genre. In my view (am I alone here?) much of the problem of how jazz has been and continues to be perceived, is not about the music qua music, but about its beginnings, its associations, its marketing, its use in television and cinema, and its revolutionary artistic nature. But another factor - perhaps a big one - determining its status and hence its appeal is that it is the “black man’s music”. And being “black”, we the people have been consistently reminded, is to be less intelligent, less attractive, than being “white”.



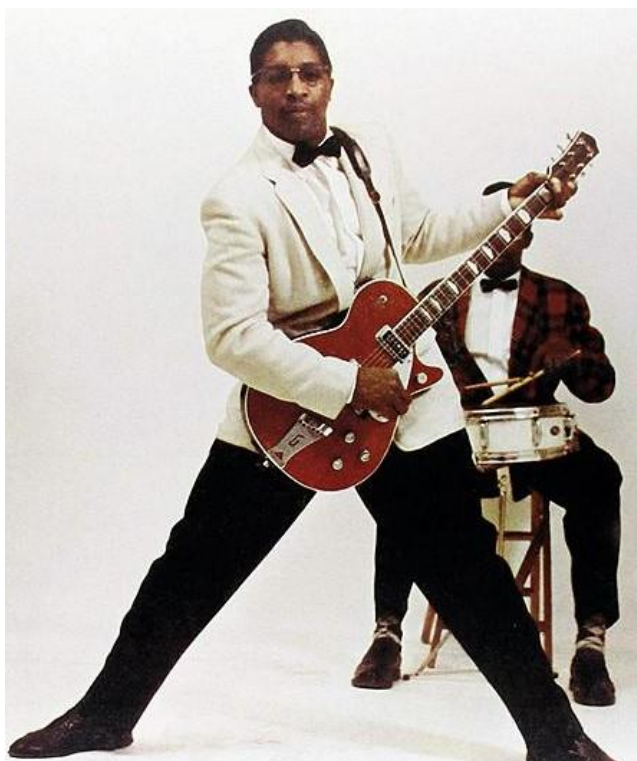
Pianist Mike Nock: he calls “jazz” a much misunderstood genre...

**Ian Muldoon has been a jazz enthusiast since, as a child, he heard his aunt play Fats Waller and Duke Ellington on the household piano. At around ten years of age he was given a windup record player and a modest supply of steel needles, on which he played his record collection, consisting of two 78s, one featuring Dizzy Gillespie and the other Fats Waller. He listened to Eric Child’s ABC radio programs in the 1950s and has been a prolific jazz records collector wherever he lived in the world, including Sydney, Kowloon, Winnipeg, New York and Melbourne. He has been a jazz broadcaster on a number of community radio stations in various cities, and now lives in Coffs Harbour. In 2021 he published a collection of essays on jazz subjects, entitled “My Jazz Odyssey: Confessions of a Lifetime Enthusiast”.*

This notion is a deeply imbedded one that has been reinforced over hundreds of years especially during colonisation. In Australia, First Nations people were slaughtered in their thousands. Concerned for what was happening in Queensland, British High Commissioner, Arthur Hamilton Gordon reported to Prime Minister of England Gladstone in 1868:

*The habit of regarding the natives as vermin, and cleared off the face of the earth, has given the average Queenslander a tone of brutality and cruelty ... I have heard men of culture and refinement ... talk, not only of the wholesale butchery ... but of the individual murder of natives, exactly as they would talk of a day's sport, or having to kill some troublesome animal.**

In the 20th Century such beliefs of the inferiority of the “black” found contemporary expression in cinema, advertising, politics, and music. Such pervasiveness was much helped by the propagation of American culture through cinema and television. The ideal family as depicted in media in the last century was a white American one with a clean suburban house well stocked with appliances like washing machines and refrigerators. In music, “rock and roll” evolved directly from “black man’s” music, but its phenomenal successes were bands made of white musicians even though artists like Bo Diddley or B B King may have been musically superior to the most successful white bands, their blackness made them way less marketable. Being white has been hitherto, but less so now, marketing gold.



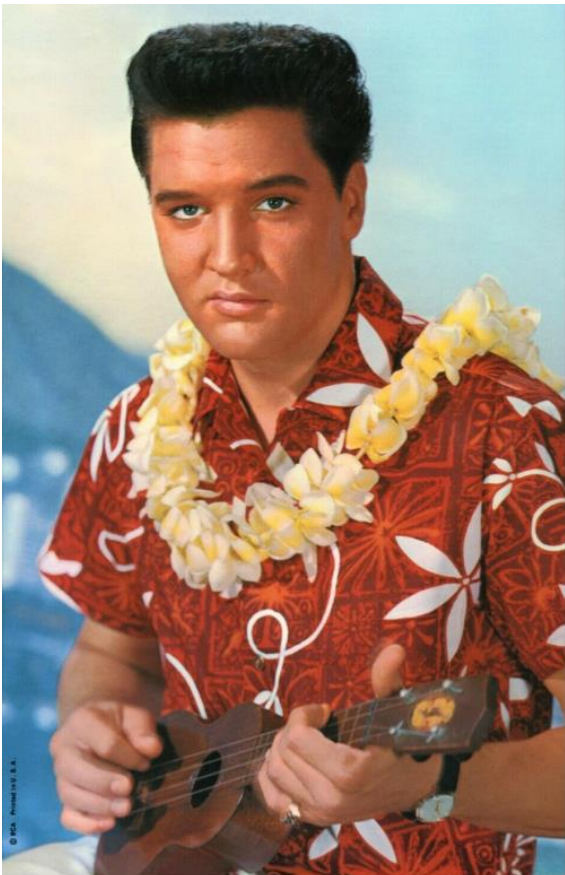
Artists like Bo Diddley (left) or B B King (see next page) may have been musically superior to the most successful white bands, their blackness made them way less marketable... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

**The New Age Of Empire, Kehinde Andrews, Allan Lane, Great Britain, p 37.*



B B King... PHOTO CREDIT SCOTT HARRISON

Elvis Presley's adaptation of black music established him as a talented performer but he became a hugely popular phenomenon through marketing which took him away from the fine (black-based) music he played in his earliest recording years to the Hollywood of *Blue Hawaii*, and flowered shirts, pretty white girls in frocks, and a sanitised image of the American male and sanitised music. Still, as they say, that's business. Even so, governments did very little to change these perceptions.



Elvis Presley: the Hollywood of "Blue Hawaii", and flowered shirts...

Perhaps the most signal example in recent American culture of this reality of black inferiority is that of Michael Jackson whose world popularity in popular music in the 1980s was unmatched and he remains the top selling individual musical artist of all time(RIAA). Yet Jackson's goal was to rid himself of blackness - nose shape, skin pigment - because being black was inferior to being "white", steeped as it was in the culture of the land of his birth. Yet black music has been the one great artistic contribution America has made to the world, and it is a most elegant art.



Michael Jackson: his goal was to rid himself of blackness - nose shape, skin pigment - because being black was inferior to being "white"...

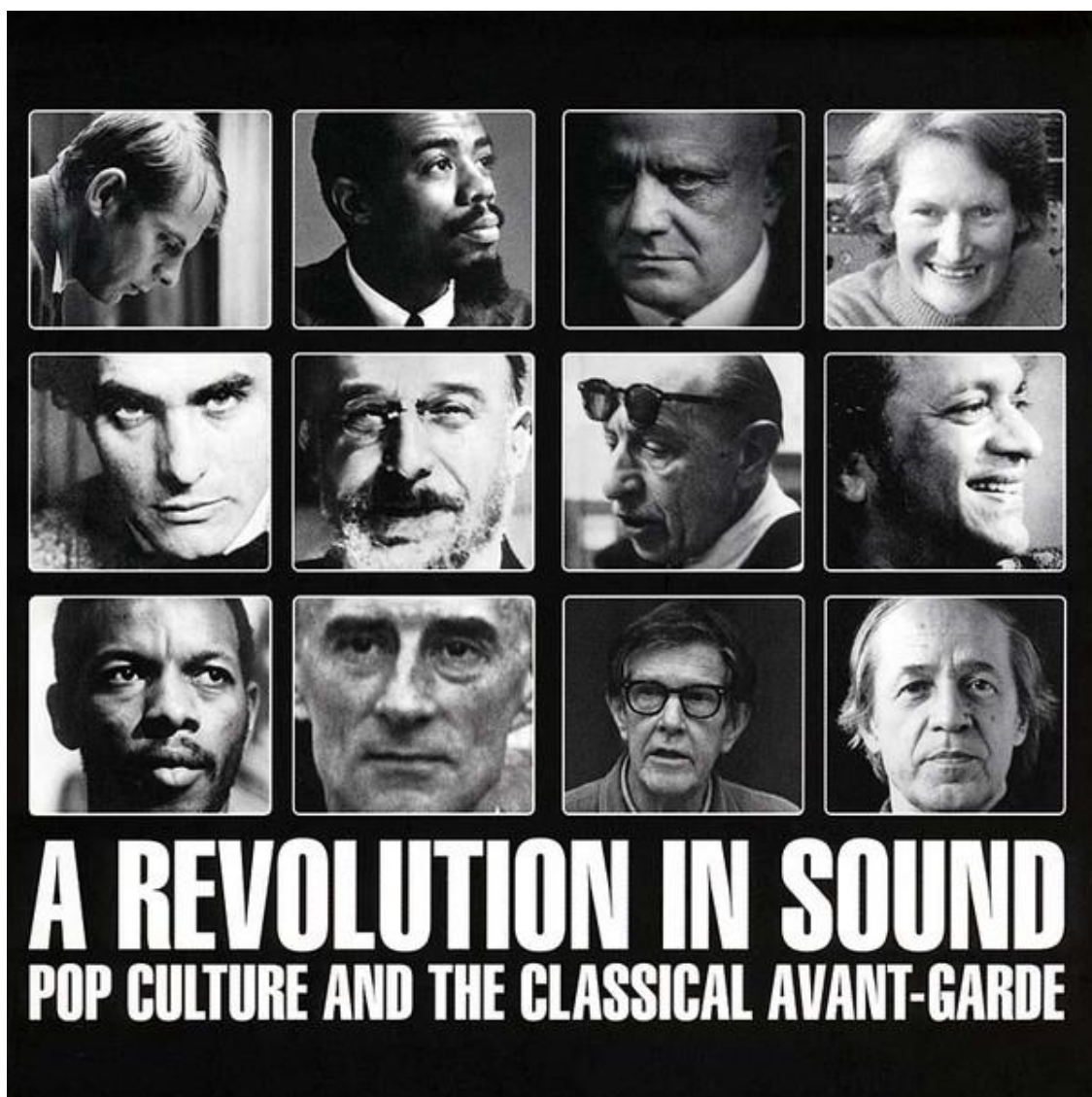
The OED defines "elegance" as the "refined grace of form and movement" and the "elegant arts" are those "pertaining to the adornment of life" (cf fine arts) and cites *inter alia* this example of its use "a high state of the elegant arts is indicative of great advancement in civilisation." (Craig).

Few would cite jazz as one of the elegant arts. But neither would many cite football as elegant. The usual "sensible" understanding is that ballet is elegant, but not football. Yet, football, and any sport played at a high level, may be elegant in the beauty of the physical form and the "refined grace of form and movement."

When I first met AFL player Brett Kirk I thought he was in ballet as he had the physique, poise and bruised toenails of a ballet dancer. Indeed, I see much elegance in that sport especially on the occasion of a ball-up or flying for a mark. Leni Riefenstahl, who documented the 1936 Summer Olympics on film, released it in 1938 in two parts with the second part called *Fest der Schönheit (Festival of Beauty)*. And the film is one of the most beautiful ever made regarding the elegance of the

human body in its graceful movement in a wide variety of extreme physical attitudes. But with music, elegance tends to be reserved for the likes of Mozart and the prejudice against the jazz genre persists.

Just to take one recent instance the four CD Cherry Red (UK) release *A Revolution In Sound: Pop Culture And The Classical Avant-Garde* includes Ornette Coleman, Eric Dolphy, John Coltrane, and Bill Evans as representatives of pop culture and Liszt, Boulez, Humphrey Searle, and John Cage etc as representatives of classical avant-garde. To place Coleman, Dolphy, Coltrane and Evans together with Patti Page, Mick Jagger, Britney Spears, and The Beatles as pop culture members, shows a bizarre misunderstanding of the musical arts. In short, there is “classical” or “serious” music and then there’s the rest which may be labelled any which way but falls under the rubric “popular”. As in much of life, status is the driving force behind these labels rather than artistic excellence.



The word “jazz” didn’t exist before the music itself. And its genesis was (mainly) in the multitudinous masses who were working and living and passing through the great port city of New Orleans. It was not music of the drawing room, concert hall or opera house. It was music of the streets, bordellos, public bars, halls

and ceremonies of the slaves and working people. The crews from ships helped transport it to other countries. The elegance of Mozart and Mendelssohn was considered to be very far removed from the coarseness of “jazz” if indeed jazz could be described as music at all.

The first work I’d like to refer you to as evidence of jazz as a most elegant art is one by Louis Armstrong, a child of that time with a criminal background who had been variously employed in the rag and bone trade and delivering coal. I choose Armstrong because he was a trumpet player, he was depicted in films as the primitive black savage in a leopard skin, or as a jolly entertainer, and musically he could play his trumpet very loud indeed. As well Armstrong had an unusual voice.



Louis Armstrong: depicted in the 1932 film “Rhapsody in Black and Blue” as the primitive black savage in a leopard skin...

The work I’ve chosen was one I re-listened to a week ago as part of a random selection of all my music which is across nearly every genre but is mostly classical and improvised (jazz) music. The composition is by Spencer Williams and is called *Basin Street Blues*. It was recorded on 27th January 1933 in Chicago by Louis Armstrong and His Orchestra. The work attracted Armstrong both because of its melody and its specific harmonic progression. One of the finest writers, Whitney Balliett, said this about this performance:

*Armstrong’s playing is supernatural. He wheels around in the higher register like a gull, he uses sorrowing middle-register blue notes no other trumpeter has matched, he performs incredible rhythmic tricks, he plays with an exalted lyricism. He is majestic and simple and elegant.**

**Booklet to Portrait Of The Artist: 1923-1934, Dan Morgenstern, p 27.*

To me these 3'28" of music containing rhythmic genius, wordless vocal, compelling structure, glorious trumpet and emotional power have no equal in music. If most music lovers describe Mozart as the pre-eminent elegant music maker, then Armstrong on that understanding of the word, is outside Mozart. Nothing in Mozart can equal Armstrong's genius with rhythm, and his emotional power. So the understanding of what is elegant, indeed, what is beautiful, has changed considerably in music through the emergence of jazz. And trumpet players in the genre have contributed much.



Nothing in Mozart (left) can equal Louis Armstrong's genius with rhythm, and his emotional power...

Modern evidence of elegance in trumpet playing might start with Phil Slater. *The Dark Pattern* features long-time musical collaborators of Slater, pianist Matt McMahon, drummer Simon Barker, bassist Brett Hirst and tenor saxophonist Matt Keegan. This quintet is the standard bebop line-up of trumpet, sax, piano, bass and drums. Legendary examples of the bebop band include "the" quintet of Charlie Parker at Massey Hall, Lee Morgan Quintet, and Miles Davis with Coltrane yet Slater eschews the declamatory power and complex chord changes and virtuosity of the trumpet players in bebop. Nor does he deploy on *The Dark Pattern* the bright clear tone for which the instrument is renowned - Slater is an accomplished master of the instrument and may choose a variety of approaches not uncommon among post-Davis trumpeters such as Enrico Rava and Tomasz Stanko. There is no bravura on *The Dark Pattern*. Nor is there the standard ensemble, solos, ensemble pattern. There are no straight lines or bridges and the listener is disarmed in the playing by the lack of cliché and lick. Restraint, sobriety, space are the signposts to the composer, performer and leader's intentions. And the intentions seem to be the honest, heartfelt individual expression of Slater's response to the natural world of his homeland.



Phil Slater's "The Dark Pattern": restraint, sobriety, space are the signposts to the composer, performer and leader's intentions...

A modus operandi is an insistent repetitive phrase figure by the piano with bass and percussion support, and a long developed trumpet solo. *The Golden Seam* (Slater) begins with a descending repetitive piano figure, a gentle trumpet, building slowly in volume and intensity. *Seven* (Slater) the longest and most affecting piece, begins quietly featuring long held notes, held sustain, and space - noteworthy too is the bass solo. It seems an intense study in sound and the tension builds and builds broken perhaps by a held burst on the cymbals by Simon Barker. *Seven* is a pretty intense listening experience. Because of the originality of the music there is no comfortable familiarity for the listener which has the effect of drawing the listener in to experience "the sound of surprise."

On *The Dark Pattern* (Slater) there is one very fine sax solo by Matt Keegan, one by pianist Matt McMahon on *Seven*, but otherwise it's pretty much a trumpet outing. *Third Bell* (Slater) is perhaps the performance that demonstrates best the elegance of Slater in his long held notes and simplicity of expression and it is also the work - in three parts - that provides a taste of the collective artistry of the group. The middle section swings compellingly. *Cloud Hidden* (Slater) is the least restrained outing. It has trumpet/sax harmony in the opening, an unusual and expressionist solo from Keegan with some moments of structured beauty by trumpet backed by bass and drums.

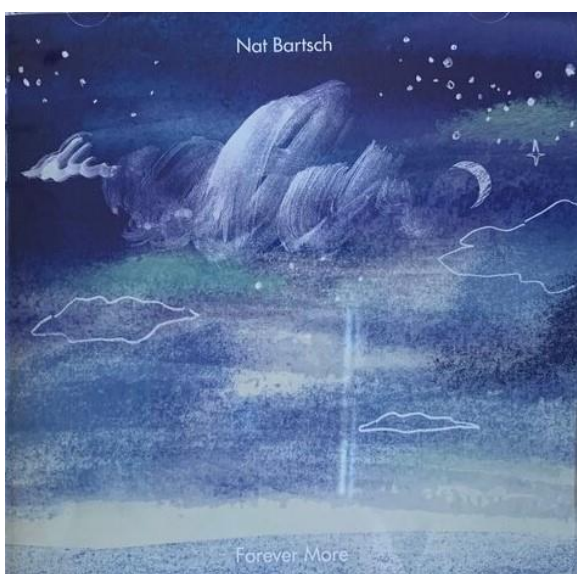
The Dark Pattern is music for the long haul, to savour and reflect on. Slater takes the listener on a very personal journey in his programme of 11 original compositions but for an interesting comparison of the trumpet in a more collective and interactive mode, *Freya* an original programme by Tineke Postma is an outstandingly elegant example of the trumpet of Ralph Alessi.



The New Yorker
Ralph Alessi: an
outstandingly
elegant trumpeter...

What's so powerful about *Freya* by Tineke Postma (Edition Records) 2020, with the leader and composer on alto and soprano saxophones; Ralph Alessi, trumpet; Kris Davis, piano; Matthew Brewer, double bass and electric bass; and Dan Weiss, drums, is the interaction of the instrumentalists where each unique individual voice contributes strongly yet creates a sonic whole of harmonic elegance and rhythmic power. It's quite the treat! The longest piece *Heart to Heart* (Postma) is opened by the bass at *adagio* tempo, followed by the altoist with muted trumpet stating the melody. Another bass solo, then the muted trumpet replies at a faster tempo, and the alto takes over with a wide-ranging expressive solo and to the coda of mute and alto in the very appealing lower register.

Armstrong, Slater and Alessi are a tiny sampling of that quintessential jazz voice, the trumpet, but a reasonable one showing the quite wide differences in approach related to the individual personalities of each and the elegance of each. The quintessential classical instrument the piano can also be strikingly individual under the fingers of a jazz pianist.



Nat Bartsch's 2020 document "Forever More" has a compelling elegance perhaps in the more common understanding of that term by those who equate musical elegance with reserve, balance, sweetness and melody...

An interesting and recent example of jazz piano is Nat Bartsch whose programme of eight works on her document *Forever More* (ABC 2020) has a compelling elegance perhaps in the more common understanding of that term by those who equate musical elegance with reserve, balance, sweetness and melody. It's true that Bartsch has a modesty and reserve mirrored in her works, but like any artist of the genre, that's her voice not some manufactured performance, and it's a voice powered by love in this programme.



Nat Bartsch... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Ms Bartsch refers to lullabies she wrote after her son was born and which, thank heavens, she decided to formalise and perform with a sextet: Bartsch, piano; Robbie Melville, guitar; Rani Kolac, violin/effects; Anita Quayle cello/effects; Tamara Murphy, double bass; and Maddison Carter, drums. *Here I Am, Just For You* (Bartsch) where the piano provides a melodic repetitious foundation for others to improvise over, is a prime example of her generosity and the collective nature of her approach. On *Lights and Shadows* (Bartsch) there's a delightful cello solo by Quayle; On *Rockabye* (Bartsch), at a bright *andante* tempo with strong melody, Murphy on bass solos with the piano backing, then Melville on an uplifting guitar solo, all contributing to a radiant mood. But *The Little Possum* (Bartsch) with its gentle tempo and rhythm, a moving bass solo and exultant piano climax, is perhaps the most joyful. An art made most elegant by the individual voices of this fine sextet of jazz instrumentalists.

For other instances out of very many thousands I give the following as prime examples of this most elegant Art:

Amaryllis (Halvorson) from *Amaryllis* (Nonesuch, 2022) with Adam O’Farrill, trumpet; Jacob Garchik, trombone; Patricia Brennan, vibraphone; Mary Halvorson, guitar; Nick Dunston, bass; Tomas Fujiwara, drums and The Mivos Quartet of Olivia De Prato, violin; Maya Bennardo, violin; Victor Lowrie Tafoya, viola; and Tyler J. Borden, cello.



Mary Halvorson

Lillian (Hamilton) from *Chico Hamilton Quintet* (1957) with Paul Horn (alto sax), Fred Katz (cello), John Pisano (guitar), Carson Smith (bass), Chico Hamilton (drums).



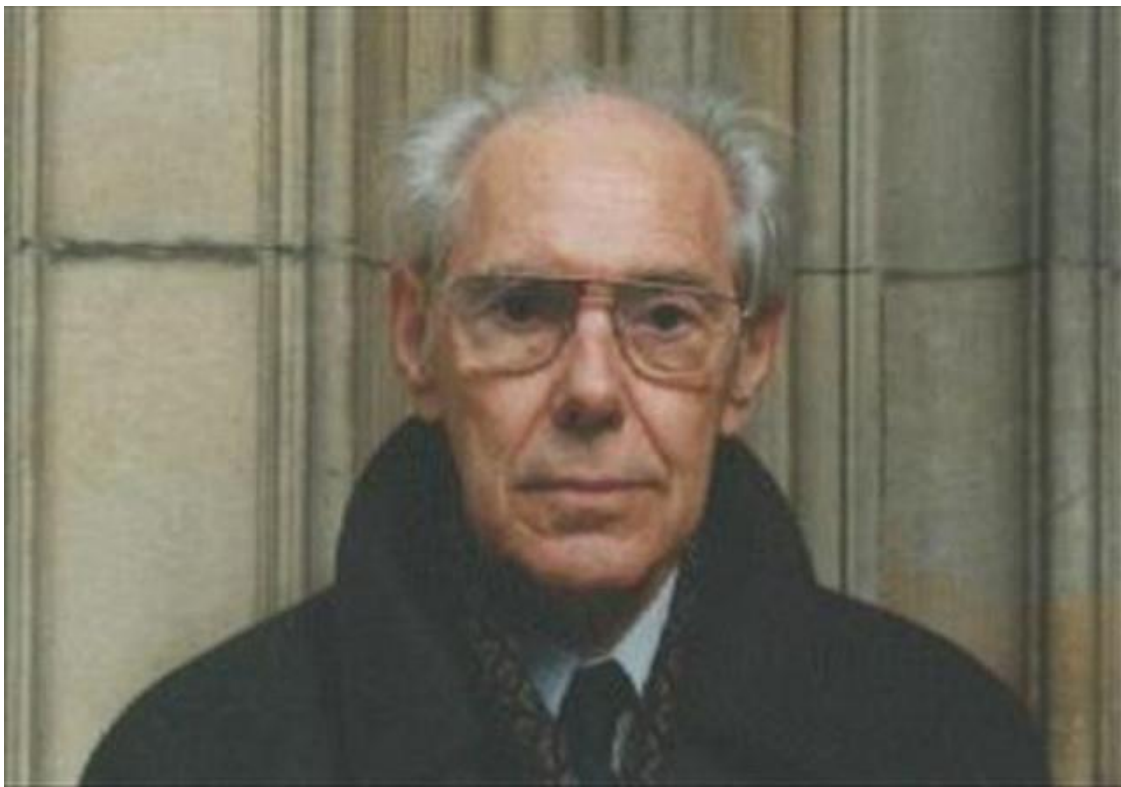
Chico Hamilton

Blue (Allen) from *Twylight* (Minor Music, 1989), Geri Allen, piano solo.



Geri Allen

Song of Ruth (Petr Eben) from *Cantando* (ECM, 2007) with Bobo Stenson, piano; Anders Jormin, bass; and Jon Fält, drums.



Petr Eben

Interlude (Harper) from *The Need's Got To Be So Deep* (HiPNOTIC, 2014) 2-CDs, Darryl Harper, clarinet (quartet).



Darryl Harper

The Visiting Tank for string quartet and sampler (Hemingway), Joshua Gordon, cello; Gerry Hemingway, sampler; Liuh-Wen Ting, viola; and Min-Young Kim, Sara Parkins, violins.



Gerry Hemingway
