Program Notes

These marvelous arrangements for jazz band of Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s fabled Nutcracker Suite, that was first performed by the Duke Ellington Orchestra in 1960, were most certainly an ambitious task undertaken by the prolific writing cooperative of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn. In substantially recomposing the ballet suite, Ellington and Strayhorn didn’t simply overlay a “jazz beat” behind the Russian composer’s work; they transformed it into something that is idiomatic to jazz, extending his basic ideas and harmonies in new and surprising ways. As orchestrators and harmonists, Ellington and Strayhorn found inspiration in Debussy and Ravel. The jazz band piece incorporates an intoxicating exotic element in this substantially recomposed work that stays true to both the Russian’s original work and their own distinctive voice.

In the 1990s an ambitious project was initiated by David Berger, a band leader and arranger active in New York City, to more fully “flesh out” the original Ellington/Strayhorn project, so as to be able to fill an entire concert program with only Nutcracker movements. As it was, the original length of the Ellington recording was only 35 minutes in length. And so The Harlem Nutcracker was born and continues to this day.
By Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn, and David Berger

Featuring
Central Washington University Jazz Band I
Directed by Chris Bruya

Friday, December 13
7:00pm
McIntyre Music Building
CWU campus
Ellensburg, Washington

Saturday, December 14
2:00pm
The Seasons Performance Hall
Yakima, Washington