

**Avery Sharpe**  
***400: An African American Musical Portrait***

At the very outset of his 800-page volume *A New History of Jazz*, British scholar Alyn Shipton states: “The first generation of jazz musicians were all born at a time when slavery and all that it stood for was well within living memory, and reminders of that era were omnipresent in the early years of the music.” It makes sense that the generations to follow would see it as part of their mission to engage with this history, in whatever form that might take. At Carnegie Hall in 1943, in one of a number of watershed jazz events at that New York venue, Duke Ellington premiered *Black, Brown and Beige: A Tone Parallel to the History of the American Negro*. Many other examples abound of jazz artists creating music that strives to transcend music, that addresses the social and political realities of our times.

With *400: An African American Musical Portrait*, bassist Avery Sharpe — born in 1954 in the Jim Crow state of Georgia — seeks to further that storied legacy, bringing his own imagination and compositional gifts to the endeavor. And much as Ellington organized his 1943 opus into distinct “black,” “brown” and “beige” sections marking time periods, Sharpe proceeds chronologically, century by century, commemorating 400 years (1619-2019) since the arrival of the first enslaved Africans to the shores of the Colony of Virginia. He devotes two or three compositions to each of the four centuries, and what emerges is an epic tale, from the beginnings of chattel slavery to the Civil War and Reconstruction, through the Great Migration and the World Wars to the Civil Rights Era, the Obama presidency and all the history yet to be lived, let alone written (hence the climactic and rousing “500,” which ends the program).

The historical turn is not new for Sharpe: in recent years he’s undertaken album projects honoring Sojourner Truth, Jesse Owens and Sister Rosetta Tharpe. He also collaborated with actress/director Jasmine Guy on the interdisciplinary theater piece *Raisin’ Cane: A Harlem Renaissance Odyssey*. Viewed in this light, *400* is a culmination, an ambitious step toward the next level.

Sharpe’s formidable bass, an identifying sound in the McCoy Tyner Trio for so many years, is very present on *400*, but only acoustic; the leader opted for these purposes to leave his electric aside. There’s something ancient in that upright bass sound, a quality enhanced by Kevin Eubanks’ acoustic guitar on four tracks (he plays electric on a fifth, “Blues and World War II”). Straight away on the opening “Arrival,” we hear that timbre and resonance of strings against wood, something so central to the blues, and to the early African American syncopating string bands, yet filtered through the modern jazz aesthetic that so deeply informs Eubanks’ burning improvisations.

The ensemble textures change frequently on *400*, and the haunting, sonorous voices of the Extended Family Choir become a key thematic element throughout. Sharpe’s longtime colleague Ronnie Burrage, on drums, provides a steady rhythmic foundation (with Tendai Muparutsa supplementing the groove on djembe throughout Century One). Apart from “Blues and World War II” which features pianist Davis Whitfield, the piano chair is filled by the young Zaccai Curtis, who plays with great poise and versatility, nailing the meticulously composed ragtime opening of “A New Music.” In that piece from Century Three, we reach the part of the story where jazz is born, yet the bracing bop-tinged passages articulated by saxophonist Don Braden (playing soprano) and trumpeter Duane Eubanks (the guitarist’s younger brother) make clear that Sharpe is after more than period authenticity.

In Century Two on “Fiddler,” however, with the brief but memorable appearance of Kevin Zhou and Sophia Jeongyoon Han on violins, we get a more explicit stylistic evocation of a time and place. We hear the classical music of the master’s parlor (with a fine, swinging bass solo intervening), and then a segue to the vernacular fiddle music of the plantation, played on one of the only instruments that slaves were typically permitted. It’s the second of two portraits of “Colonial Life,” as the preceding track is called, a stately minor-key waltz and another effective acoustic guitar feature, framed by subtle background figures from the younger Eubanks as well as Braden on flute.

The Extended Family Choir gives *400* a good deal of its narrative coherence, and its members are indeed family: director/bass/tenor Kevin Sharpe is the leader’s brother, soprano/alto Sofia Rivera his niece, alto Wanda Rivera his sister and bass Robert Rivera his nephew. Soprano Shaina Paris and tenor Heshima Moja round out the voices, heard to such powerful effect throughout Century One, singing in Swahili as well as Liberian dialect. The purely a cappella movement “Antebellum” from Century Three reminds us of the centrality of the voice in the firmament of black music. Beginning as a tranquil hymn and cresting in a repeated gospel chant of “wake up, rise up,” the piece presages Century Four and the Civil Rights era, with “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around” (the album’s one cover) as a centerpiece.

The majestic protest anthem shifts into a funk vamp as Sofia Rivera begins to deliver a self-authored spoken word recitation. She invokes the names of Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Zora Neale Hurston as well as Tamir Rice and Trayvon Martin; she mentions “lynching, segregation, voter suppression, over-policing, discrimination”; she cites Muhammad Ali, Tommy Smith, John Carlos and Colin Kaepernick as role models in a legacy of risk-taking dissent. And she concludes:

America, land I love  
Country that despises me in one breath then praises me in the next  
I am black  
I am American  
I will not be dismayed  
I will not retreat  
I will not back down  
I will kneel, I will stand  
I will march, I will vote  
I will run for office  
Never backward, onward, forward  
There is no turning back now

And as this unfolds the choir riffs underneath her, “Gotta keep on movin’ / don’t stop the stride / gotta keep on movin’ / look up with pride.” If there is a single message to take away from *400*, perhaps it is this. It resonates too in the finale “500,” in the bass-driven 7/8 pulse, in the fiery solo rotation, in the themes and contrapuntal passages voiced so deftly by guitar with the horns. *400* meditates on the journey the music has taken; in “500” we’re made newly aware that the journey is still in progress.

David R. Adler  
Athens, Georgia  
February 2019