

## The Classical Side of Dave Brubeck

By: [John Salmon](#)

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### **Article:**

Most members of Music Teachers National Association (MTNA) probably know Dave Brubeck, born in 1920, as one of the pioneers of jazz, especially in the late 1950s when "Take Five" and "Blue Rondo a la Turk" became jazz standards. These works broke both commercial and musical boundaries, as the first jazz singles ever to sell a million recordings and the first jazz tunes in 5/4 and 9/8 meters, respectively. If you are a piano teacher, it is likely at least one of your piano students has expressed the desire to play one of these pieces, almost as ubiquitous a desire as to play "Für Elise" or the "Moonlight Sonata." As well, many music teachers today, otherwise cut off from the jazz world, have undoubtedly heard the Dave Brubeck Quartet live in concert. Brubeck has been touring with one form or another of this group for well over fifty years, making him one of jazz history's most active performers, and his audiences as large and demographically widespread as imaginable. Just as predictable, however, is that many MTNA members do not know of Brubeck's "other" career as a composer of concert works in almost every medium. From his early days as a composition student of Darius Milhaud at Mills College, Brubeck has maintained a parallel occupation as creator of written-out musical works, crafted with the same care for counterpoint, harmony and form as any work by Copland or Stravinsky. To be sure, this parallel career often has intersected Brubeck's "straight" jazz work, as when Brubeck's 1946 Octet (comprised mainly of Milhaud's composition students) would swing the standard "The Way You Look Tonight" in Brubeck's complex arrangement of counterpoint, sounding kind of like a fusion of Hindemith's *Ludus Tonalis* and Benny Goodman's *Sing, Sing, Sing*, or when a 1967 Brubeck would improvise Middle Eastern melodies within his large-scale choral work, *The Light in the Wilderness*.

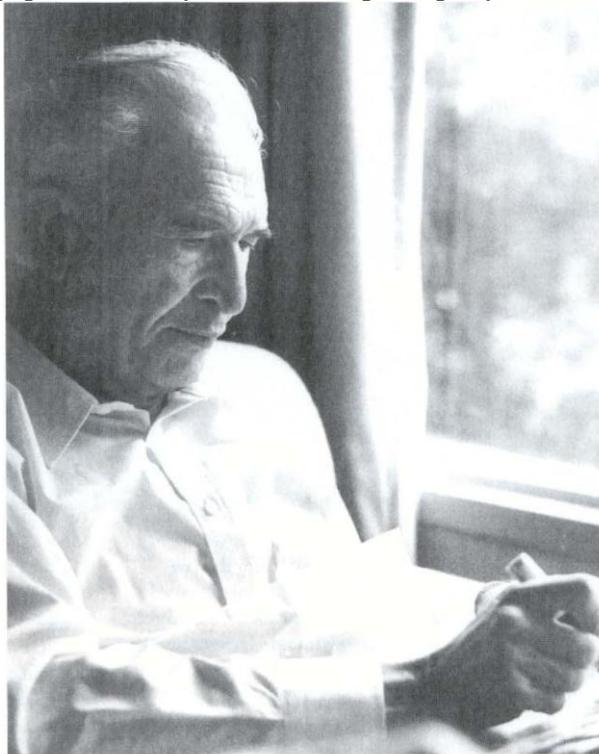
There are dozens of other works, such as the string quartet *Chromatic Fantasy*, recorded by the Brodsky Quartet, or the multi-movement *Theme and Explorations for Orchestra*, premiered by the Pittsburgh Symphony, that are intended for the concert stage and to be performed by musicians with a classical background. It helps, of course, if the performers have heard jazz, and particularly that they can swing convincingly. In this regard, Brubeck's output is similar to many other works of the twentieth century that derive from the jazz idiom, like Samuel Barber's "Blues" from the set *Excursions* or Gershwin's Prelude No. 2, both works requiring a finely honed jazz lilt. As important, however, players of these "classical" Brubeck works must have comprehensive techniques and musicianship encompassing the most complex of notated rhythms. In other words, Brubeck's compositions transcend the type exemplified by most jazz composers, namely, a "lead sheet" with melody and chord symbols, laying out merely the "head," over which experienced jazz musicians would improvise. In "fake books," tunes by Chick Corea, Miles Davis, Wayne Shorter and others only suggest jazz literature. To fully appreciate, say, the Bill Evans composition, "Blue in Green," we must listen to the recorded example thereof, on the record *Kind of Blue*. The "composition" is surely the aggregate of head and improvised solos—not merely the ten-bar melody with chord symbols.

While it is true many of Brubeck's more traditional jazz tunes like "In Your Own Sweet Way" and "The Duke" (both, significantly enough, in thirty-two-bar ballad form and 4/4 meter) have been schematized as lead sheets, realizable only by jazz musicians, Brubeck has tended to write out works far more than his counterparts in the jazz world, partly out of musical necessity. There is no way his Octet from the late 1940s could have ever performed those wild, highly idiosyncratic arrangements of standards without the most

careful notation. Likewise, his 1963 composition, "World's Fair," recorded by the Dave Brubeck Quarter on an album titled *Time Changes*, required careful scoring to bring to life the dodecaphonic melody and counter-melody, not to mention poly-metric rhythms.

### **Brubeck's Distinctiveness**

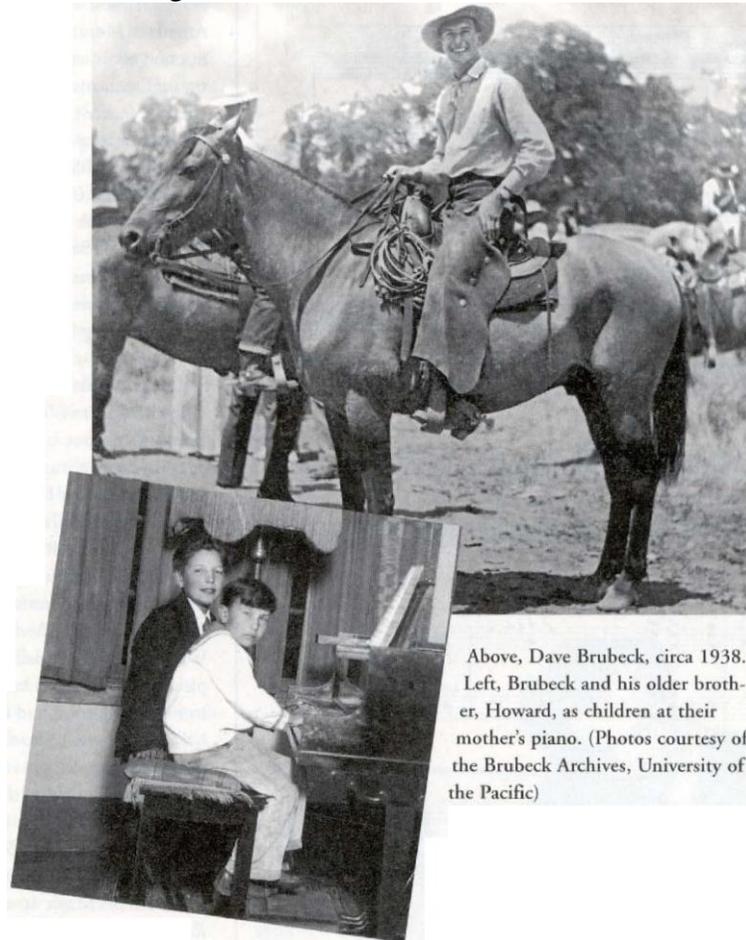
To a large extent, Brubeck's distinctiveness in the jazz world stems from his explicit intent to fuse classical and jazz idioms. When bebop, largely an East coast phenomenon, was first rearing its chromatic, blues-inflected head in the mid to late 1940s, Brubeck, on the West coast, derived more inspiration from Chopin and Bach, and from Milhaud and Stravinsky, than from Dizzy and Bird. As Brubeck recalled in a 1995 interview, "I was in a period [late 1940s] when I was trying not to listen to much jazz. I was trying to develop an individual style." That "individuality," while inflaming early critics who wanted Brubeck to fit the bebop mold, won enormous popularity, and not just with the clean-cut, white college crowd of the late '50s, an audience he did win over on numerous college tours. His improvised counterpoint with alto saxophonist Paul Desmond, often resembling the diatonic sequences of Bach inventions and often in very nearly straight eighths, clearly alienated bop diehards accustomed to, say, Bud Powell's richly chromatic, blazingly swinging lines. Also, supposedly Brubeck's appearance on a *Time* magazine cover in 1954 (only the second jazz musician after Louis Armstrong so honored), upset some in the black jazz world who felt that Duke Ellington or Charlie Parker would have been better choices. Those early critics would have been astonished to find so many Brubeck enthusiasts among the list of black jazz luminaries, those who collectively created what we know as "swing": Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Charlie Parker, Charles Mingus, and, eventually, after having spewed a few jealousy-induced invectives, even Miles Davis, the curmudgeonliest of all jazz stars. Just as surprising to some Brubeck naysayers would have been the Brubeck Quartet's popularity in the entertainment polls conducted in the '50s by *The Pittsburgh Courier*, a newspaper owned by blacks for a principally black readership.



Dave Brubeck is a composer as well as performer. (Photo by Martin Bilyeau)

It is, of course, simplistic to couch the argument exclusively in terms of "black esthetic" versus "white esthetic," the former signifying beboppers like Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell, and a little later, the so-called "hard boppers" like Art Blakey and Horace Silver on the East coast, and the latter representative of the "West coast school" of Stan Kenton, Jimmy Giuffre and Brubeck, among others. While it is true "hard bop" emerged largely as a reaction to what was perceived as unnatural efforts to conjoin classical and jazz musics and an attempt to get back to the African roots of jazz, it is wrong to place too much credence in the solidarity of a (white) West coast school and (black) bebop esthetic. There was far more cross reference and interpenetration than most

scholars and critics knew: Did they know, for example, that Charles Mingus, one charter member of the "hard bop" sound, became one of the staunchest personal and musical allies of Brubeck alto saxophonist Paul Desmond, who was everything Charlie Parker was not? Did they know that Brubeck's oldest brother, Henry, had been the first drummer in Gil Evans's band in Stockton, California? The esthetic that impelled Evans to collaborate so fruitfully with Miles Davis on a number of recordings, including *The Birth of the Cool* and *Sketches of Spain*, placing emphasis on orchestral sonorities and sophisticated tone colors with "cool" moods, very closely parallels Brubeck's experiments with European sounds and forms. Who influenced whom is probably not as revealing a line of inquiry as the simple recognition that many musicians, both East and West coast, were responding to the same Zeitgeist.



Above, Dave Brubeck, circa 1938. Left, Brubeck and his older brother, Howard, as children at their mother's piano. (Photos courtesy of the Brubeck Archives, University of the Pacific)

It is equally misleading to discount Brubeck's classical background, as jazz historian Mark Gridley comes close to doing in his assessment, "It remains a widely held misunderstanding that Brubeck was trained primarily in the classics."<sup>2</sup> While it is true Brubeck was not trained as a classical pianist, somewhat to the early frustration of his mother and first piano teacher, Elizabeth Ivey Brubeck, there is no question Brubeck listened (and perhaps listens still) to as much classical music as jazz. This classical element in Brubeck's background helps explain his mature, compositional predilections.

Elizabeth Ivey Brubeck was a piano teacher who herself had studied in London with Tobias Matthay and Dame Myra Hess. When Brubeck was growing up, he always heard the classical literature his mother was teaching—Bach inventions, Mozart sonatas, Chopin preludes. He learned early on to imitate those sounds, almost purely by ear, since he had difficulty early in life learning to read music. This difficulty in all likelihood emanated from having been born cross-eyed, a condition ameliorated with the help of thick glasses, eventually disappearing by middle age. (If Brubeck had been a fluent reader, who knows if he would have become such a fertile improviser?) To complete the picture, Brubeck's two older brothers had become professional musicians, heavily steeped in "Western art music." Older brother Howard, who died in 1993, had been Milhaud's assistant, a composer in his own right, transcriber of Brubeck's recorded works and eventually dean of humanities at Palomar College in California, while oldest brother Henry became superintendent of music in the Santa Barbara

public schools.

So, we end up with a rather confounding portrait of one of our great American composers: On the one hand, Brubeck still is not completely appreciated in the jazz world. Witness his inexplicable omission from the *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*, a set of recordings purporting to cover the entire history of jazz's highpoints, or his omission from the Jamey Aebersold "play-along" compact discs, a mainstay of every high school and college jazz program. As Ted Gioia says in his perceptive book, *West Coast Jazz*, Brubeck remains "extraordinarily well known and, at the same time, quite badly misunderstood." But, in the classical world, he is even more of an enigma. Just last October, a record producer who has specialized in twentieth-century American composers, sent me a (rejection) letter citing Brubeck's nonreputation as a "concert music" composer. If, by "reputation," this producer meant that Brubeck has not achieved the same level of success and recognition in the classical domain as he achieved in the jazz world—documented by literally hundreds of awards, including ten honorary doctorates, first place in numerous *Playboy* and *Down Beat* jazz polls, and many records, such as the most successful recording artist Columbia Records had for seventeen years—then Brubeck *qua* composer-for-the-concert-stage may be doomed forever to lie in the shadow of his own commercial success as a jazz artist.

*Figure 1*

**TWO-PART CONTENTION**

By DAVE BRUBECK

Moderately bright

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If you have been fortunate enough to attend a live performance of one of Brubeck's large-scale choral works—say, his mass *To Hope* at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., last year, or one of the annual presentations of his Christmas work, *La Fiesta de la Posada*, at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in Manhattan—then you know that Brubeck's reputation as a "concert composer" is only a matter of time. For that matter, Brubeck's wife since 1942 and frequent collaborator, Iola Brubeck, should soon be recognized as one of the most talented lyricists America has ever produced. She has penned witty lyrics to dozens of Brubeck's songs, often with Brubeck's collaboration, as in "Cultural Exchange" from the 1961 musical, *The Real Ambassadors*, a sometimes satirical commentary on music's value to the U.S. State Department in the early 1960s and a *locus classicus* on cold-war diplomacy: "We put *Oklahoma* in Japan/ *South Pacific* we gave to Iran/And when all our neighbors called us vermin, we sent out Woody Herman/That's what we call cultural exchange/Gershwin gave the Muscovites a thrill/Bernstein was the darling of Brazil/And just to stop internal mayhem, we dispatched Martha Graham/That's what we call cultural exchange.... And if the world goes really wacky/We'll get John to send out Jackie—[spoken] You mean Jackie Robinson? No, man! I mean the First Lady—[sung]. That's what we call cultural exchange." Louis Armstrong, Carmen McRae and the vocal trio of

Lambert, Hendricks and Ross were among *The Real Ambassadors'* first singers. More recently, Dave and Iola Brubeck's songs have been sung by Al Jarreau and Dianne Reeves.

Perhaps most important to Dave and Iola Brubeck are their collaborations in putting words to Brubeck's large-scale choral works like *The Light in the Wilderness*, which often require adroit adaptation of the Bible. Dave Brubeck once wrote me, "My philosophy can be more clearly stated with words than in the abstractions of music," and it is clear he is a man who has spent the better part of his life interpreting and implementing the Scripture. The Presbyterian Church recently honored Brubeck for his "thirty-five years of integrating faith and the arts"—a period, almost as long as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's life, that saw the production of (in addition to the forementioned) such major sacred works as *The Gates of Justice* (1969), *Truth is Fallen* (1971), *Beloved Son* (1978), *Pange Lingua Variations* (1983), *The Voice of the Holy Spirit* (1985), *Upon This Rock* (1987), *Lenten Triptych: Ash Wednesday, Easter, Bless These Ashes* (1988), *In Praise of Mary: Akathistos Hymn, Corcordi Laetitia, When Jesus Spoke From the Cross* (1989) and *Joy in the Morning* (1991).

*Figure 2*  
*Dedicated to my Parents*  
**REMINISCENCES  
OF THE CATTLE COUNTRY**  
Dave Brubeck  
(1946)

Sun Up



The image shows a page of musical notation for the piece "Sun Up" from the album "Reminiscences of the Cattle Country" by Dave Brubeck. The score is written for piano and guitar. It consists of four systems of music. The first system starts with a tempo marking of quarter note = 84. The second system has a key signature change to one sharp (F#). The third system has a dynamic marking of *p* (piano). The fourth system has a dynamic marking of *cresc.* (crescendo) and ends with a *ff* (fortissimo) marking. The copyright notice at the bottom reads: "Copyright © 1980 Derry Music Company. Used With Permission."

### Brubeck's Piano Pieces

In the realm of "concert" piano works, Brubeck's output is equally expansive, discussed selectively and in a somewhat pedagogical order below.

*Nocturnes* and *Two-Part Adventures*, published by Warner Bros. in 1997 and 1999 respectively, contain simple pieces suitable for beginners or intermediate students. Among the lyrical *Nocturnes* are "Softly, William, Softly," a delicate, somewhat sad piece with some jazz harmonies presented in simple textures, and the haunting "A Misty Morning." *Two-Part Adventures* comprises simple two-voice pieces, each voice played by either the right or left hand, like the Bachian "Brandenburg Gate" and "Two-Part Contention" (see figure 1), both effective pieces to play alongside Bach's F Major Invention.

*Reminiscences of the Cattle Country*, (Schirmer) also is playable by intermediate piano students. Its six individual pieces, with titles like "Sun Up" (see figure 2) and "Breaking a Wild Horse," remind us Brubeck

grew up on a ranch northeast of Stockton, California, and for a time seemed destined to become a cowboy himself. There are several pieces from the volume *Dave's Diary* (Warner Bros.) belonging to this spirit too, like "Christmas at the Ranch" and "The Roundup Starts Tomorrow at Dawn."

Figure 3  
**GLANCES**  
I. Overture DAVE BRUBECK

$\text{♩} = 168$  or Faster (strick 8ths and 16ths)

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An intermediate student who can play Chopin preludes and Beethoven's Opus 10, No. 1 probably is ready to tackle Brubeck's *Chromatic Fantasy Sonata*, a work filled with references to Bach, including a quotation of the "D Minor Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue" and the notes B-flat, A, C, B (which, in German, of course, spell B-A-CH). This four-movement suite consists of an "Allegro Molto," "Chorale," "Fugue" (not in the first edition, but intended for subsequent publications) and "Chaconne." The jazz idiom is especially noticeable in the last movement, during which a jazzy left-hand riff in triplets forms the ground bass.



Brubeck (left) was a student of Darius Milhaud (right). The man standing is unidentified.  
(Photo courtesy of the Brubeck family)

TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

College of Fine Arts and Communication

School of Music

Presents

John Salmon, piano

Saturday, April 8, 2000

7:30 p.m.

PepsiCo Recital Hall

Program

Prelude and Fugue in F-sharp minor,  
WTC I, BWV 859

Johann Sebastian Bach  
(1685-1750)

Adagio in B minor, K. 540

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart  
(1756-1791)

Sonata in B minor, Op. 58  
Allegro maestoso  
Scherzo: Molto vivace  
Largo  
Finale: Presto, non tanto

Frédéric Chopin  
(1810-1849)

intermission

Three pieces from "Saudades do Brazil"  
Corcovade  
Sumaré  
Paysandú

Darius Milhaud  
(1892-1974)

Glances  
Overture  
Struttin'  
Blue Aria  
Dong the Charleston

Dave Brubeck  
(b. 1920)

The Piano Department wishes to thank Mr. and Mrs. Val Martin, Jr. for sponsoring this program and the Martin Memorial Competition.

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Electronic devices must be silenced.

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College of the Pacific • Stockton, California

**PHI MU ALPHA**  
FOUNDED 1912

**JAZZ RECITAL**  
The Jazz Workshop Ensemble  
Monday, January 17, 1949  
8:15 P.M.

**Program**

**SECTION I: ARRANGED JAZZ WITH SOLOISTS**

Introduction: Brubeck  
I How to Singsong (solo)  
You Go To My Head (solo)  
Keweenaw (solo)  
Blue Moon (solo)  
Lower Class Back To Me (trumpet solo)  
Lester (solo)

**SECTION II: ORIGINAL COMPOSITIONS**

Three songs from "L.A. 1" by D. E. Clummett  
Fast Gun (solo)  
Down the Road (solo)  
Whirl in the Wind (solo)  
Monsieur Dancer (solo)  
Slow Dancer (solo)  
Gulls  
Charley (solo)  
Dance Suite in Three Movements  
The Love Machine (solo)

**SECTION III: JAZZ GIGGERS**  
Improvisations on standard jazz tunes by members of the Jazz Workshop Ensemble

**Announcements**  
Jan. 18, 8:15 P.M.—SAILER METRO piano club  
with SONORA - 11:15 P.M.

ELIZABETH IVEY BRUBECK  
PRESENTS  
**Terrance Ray O'Reilly**  
In A  
**Piano Recital**

Sunday Evening, June 26, 1949, Eight O'Clock  
Butter Creek High School Auditorium

**PROGRAM**

**I**

SONATA—C Major ..... Mozart  
Allegro  
Andante  
Rondo—Allegretto Grazioso

SONATA—C Minor, Op. 10, No. 1 ..... Beethoven  
Allegro molto, e con brio  
Adagio molto  
Furto—Prestissimo

**II**

PRELUDE—Op. 28, No. 2, G Major ..... Chopin  
Op. 28, No. 15, F Major

ETUDE—Op. 29, No. 1, A Flat Major  
Op. 25, No. 12, C Minor

LIEDERSTÜCKE No. 3—A Flat Major ..... Liszt

**INTERMISSION**

**III**

CLAIR DE LUNE ..... Debussy

GOLLIWOOD'S CARE-WALK

SUNSET

BRINGING IN THE HORSES  
From "Reminiscence of the Cattle Country", Dave Brubeck

LA JONGLEUSE ..... Tchaikovsky

PRELUDE, No. 3 ..... Gershwin

DANSE RITUELLE DU FÉU ..... Debussy

**RECEPTIONISTS ARE—**

Mrs. Ralph McCre  
Dr. and Mrs. Hugo Chaffetz  
Dr. and Mrs. P. E. Alhart

Mr. and Mrs. Horace Wagner  
Mr. and Mrs. Fred Dele  
Mrs. James Ochsenschla  
Mr. and Mrs. Ray O'Reilly

A program from a piano recital by the author (above) featured a combination of classical piano music and one of Brubeck's "classical" works. It is similar, though independently conceived, to a 1949 piano recital program of a student of Brubeck's mother (left). A program at the College of the Pacific in 1949 also featured some of Brubeck's compositions (far left).

Admittedly, most of Brubeck's piano output falls in the "advanced" or "difficult" category. The ballet suite *Glances*, a four-movement work consisting of "Overture," "Struttin'," "Blue Aria" and "Doing the Charleston," is one of Brubeck's most Milhaud-inspired pieces. Already on the first page of "Overture" (see figure 3) are several Milhaudian traits, such as a white-key pandiatonicism (bars 1-3), somewhat reminiscent of the first movement of Milhaud's *Scaramouche Suite*, an approach to bitonality that pits one key in one hand against one key in the other, like many passages of Milhaud's *Saudades do Brazil*; and a generally happy, nonpretentious mood, as in many of Milhaud's works. Mastery of rapid-fire chords, like the opening of Stravinsky's *Petrouchka*, is required in several measures of "Overture."

Another ballet suite, *Points on Jazz*, also is difficult, partly because it is a transcription and compression of the original two-piano score (a version that also is available). There is a lot of ink, especially in the "Fugue" movement, and smaller hands surely will have to adapt to the frequent spans of an eleventh. All eight movements of this work are based on the same Chopinesque theme that forms the head of Brubeck's "Dziekuye," first played as a tribute to Chopin on the Dave Brubeck Quartet's 1958 tour of Poland.

And while we are on the subject of two-piano repertoire, mention should be made of *Four by Four*, a work written for one piano, four hands (but which I have performed with a colleague at two pianos), brimming with "Americanisms" like Coplandesque sonorities, rhythmic liveliness and a forthright musical expression.

They All Sang Yankee Doodle is a twelve-minute pianistic tone poem, incorporating and sometimes blending American tunes like "Yankee Doodle," cowboy melodies and church chorales, in a musical language expressly derived from Charles Ives. *Tritonis*, another twelve-minute work, belongs more to "pure" music, lacking any explicit extra-musical association, and is based at several levels on the interval of a triton.

Sources for information on Brubeck's music, in addition to the aforementioned monographs by authors Gioia, Gridley and Hall, should certainly include the vast array of recordings of Brubeck's music, both jazz and classical works, ably catalogued by Klaus-Gotthard Fischer; this discography appears as the second half of *Dave Brubeck Improvisations and Compositions: The Idea of Cultural Exchange*, an insightful analysis by Ilse Storob.<sup>4</sup> We also are well served by the newly created Brubeck Institute and Brubeck Archives at the University of the Pacific (both Dave and Iola Brubeck's alma mater) in Stockton, California. Together, the Institute and Archives will provide the springboard for future discussion and understanding of Brubeck's musical contributions. The Brubeck Institute officially opened in February 2001, marked, significantly enough, by the premiere of Brubeck's latest symphony, *Millennium Intervals*, performed by the Stockton Symphony. In a career spanning some fifty-five years, Brubeck's musical fertility may take awhile to comprehend. But, as the title of Fred Hall's biography so cleverly asserts, "It's About Time" to begin that assessment.

## SOURCES

1. Hall, Fred. *It's About Time: The Dave Brubeck Story*. Arkansas Press, 1996.
2. Gridley, Mark. *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis*, Seventh Ed. Prentice Hall, 2000.
3. Gioia, Ted. *West Coast Jazz*. Oxford University Press, 1992.
4. Storob, Ilse. *Dave Brubeck Improvisations and Compositions: The Idea of Cultural Exchange*. Peter Lang, 1994.