

“Artistry in Rhythm”—Stan Kenton (1943)

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Essay by Michael Sparke (guest post)*



Stan Kenton



Original label

Stan Kenton’s life might best be described as one long battle: to win over public acceptance in his struggle to elevate “popular” music by combining elements of jazz and classical sounds into a new, artistic style of American music. “You’ve got to believe in something to achieve whatever goal you’re shooting for. My own ideas may be wrong, but I’m going to stick with them until they break me,” declared Kenton in 1943. At the same time, and from the opposite perspective, several classical composers like Stravinsky and Villa-Lobos, were incorporating elements of jazz into their music. “Artistry in Rhythm” was Kenton’s most radical example to date of his innovative conceptions to effect a combination of the two styles.

When Kenton opened at the Rendezvous Ballroom in Balboa Beach, CA, for the summer season in 1941, he lacked the essential feature of an identifying song. Every band needed its own instantly recognizable signature tune, so rather than chose an already-known melody, Stan set to and composed a 45-second original piece which he called simply “Theme.”

By July 1943, Kenton had expanded the work into the fully developed, semi-symphonic orchestration that he called “Production on Theme.” But when it was recorded at the band’s first Capitol session on November 19, 1943, Capitol executives balked at the highbrow title, and persuaded Kenton it was better named after the orchestra’s slogan—“Artistry in Rhythm.” “And, of course,” commented Stan, “It’s stuck ever since.”

If Capitol producer Johnny Mercer had found Kenton’s original title too pretentious to be commercially acceptable, it’s unlikely he was any happier with the music itself; and it’s doubtful any of the other major companies at the time would have acceded to Stan’s desire to record the piece at all. But Capitol was a young, pioneering label, and Kenton one of the most persuasive visionaries ever to walk the planet. “If Stan had chosen politics, he would be President,” declared June Christy. Even so, Mercer made sure there were three more conventional titles in the can before he allowed the “Theme” to be recorded as the last title of the session.

Backed by the more simplistic “Eager Beaver,” “Artistry in Rhythm” was issued in February 1944 on Capitol 159, and is often described as a “hit,” which is, in reality, a popular myth. In fact, the only title from Stan’s first Capitol session that achieved moderate success was the Red Dorris vocal ballad “Do Nothin’ Till You Hear From Me,” which rose as high as number ten on “Billboard’s” top 20 chart. But once initial interest waned, “Do Nothin’” sank into obscurity, whereas, over the long term, “Artistry in Rhythm” has been reissued so many times it must have sold well over a million copies, and has archived world-wide recognition for its cultural qualities.

One canard haunted Kenton throughout his career. There is no escaping the fact that the melody of “Artistry in Rhythm” is similar to the theme “Invocation to the Nymphs” from Ravel’s “Daphnis et Chloe” (2nd Suite). (Sigmund Romberg’s “Softly, As In A Morning Sunrise” also bears a passing melodic resemblance.) But Kenton always vehemently denied he had “borrowed” from Ravel, so the likeness is probably coincidental, or possibly subliminal. Stan’s post-war copyist Clinton Roemer told me, “I mentioned the connection to Stan at Balboa in 1941, and he said he had never heard the work.” Beyond any doubt is the fact that the Kenton orchestration was unique, and entirely original.

Central to the piece is the drama achieved by Stan’s imaginative writing, which never strays far from the melody, but achieves diversity through constantly-changing tonal colors and orchestral variations. Opening with a dramatic flourish that compels attention, Joe Vernon’s drum break heralds a majestic, full-band statement of the melody. Kenton’s concert-style piano contributes a solemn thematic solo, followed by a contrasting string-bass interlude that ups the tempo. Muted trumpets introduce a swirling sectional solo by the full-bodied saxophones, leading to the closing passage during which the brass sections perform in counterpoint with each other, until coming together for the big orchestral climax for which Kenton was famous.

I wouldn’t care to estimate the number of times Stan’s “Theme” was played during a career that lasted the best part of four decades. Every concert, every dance, and most broadcasts featured “Artistry in Rhythm” at least once, in both its short and full-length forms. In Pete Rugolo’s opinion, “‘Artistry’ was a perfect trademark for the band. When you heard that theme everybody knew who it was. People loved it.”

Never commercially recorded, the peak was reached when Rugolo rewrote the Opening and Closing Themes in 1950, to include strings for the 40-piece Innovations Orchestra. The sweeping 16-man string section, added to the full Kenton “jazz” band, brought to the piece a new artistic dimension; or, in the words of one critic, “Symphonic, highly dissonant chords, with the brass at top volume, produced a spine-tingling emotional effect that could scarcely have been more impressive.”

Kenton’s being a jazz orchestra, his theme inevitably evolved over the years to suit changing bands and changing times. In general, as its popularity increased, the strict structure of Stan’s original arrangement was relaxed, and “Artistry” assumed a looser, more genial character. Kenton initially demonstrated the tune’s flexibility very deliberately in 1945 by arranging the number as a swinging, up-tempo chart featuring a savage Vido Musso saxophone solo, released on Capitol as “Artistry Jumps.” Later projects found the number emerge with bossa nova and tango rhythmic adaptations, and in 1963 lyrics were added by Milt Raskin and the work renamed “Night Song.”

But these were only transitory variations. Two permanent changes saw Kenton’s solo move to open the piece, where he could stretch out his concerto-style piano as long as he wanted, teasing the audience with variations on the melody. And the addition of Afro-Cuban rhythms gave “Artistry in Rhythm” a sense of jollity but lost the serious, classical aura of the original. The power and unambiguity of the 1943 orchestration made it unique and, to this day, a vital pacesetter in the annals of recorded Kentonia.

Michael Sparke is the author of “Stan Kenton: This Is An Orchestra!” (2011) and “Stan Kenton: The Studio Sessions: A Discography” (1998). He has contributed Kenton-related liner notes for the following labels: Capitol, Mosaic, Jasmine, Tantara, and Sounds of Yesteryear. He lives in England.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.