

American Symphony Orchestra/Botstein – Revisiting William Grant Still

Gail Wein | Sunday, March 22, 2009

ChadwickRip Van Winkle Overture **Still**

Darker America

Africa

Varèse

Offrandes

Still

Symphony No.2 in G minor (Song of a New Race)

Jennifer Rivera (mezzo-soprano)

American Symphony Orchestra

Leon Botstein

Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center, New York City

William Grant Still (1895-1978) is acknowledged as the Dean of African-American Composers. But many classical music fans can't even name one or two others. To refer to Still as the Dean of (all) American Composers is overstating the matter. And we won't ignore the fact that Still was one of the few black Americans to gain any notoriety in the world of classical music in the last century. It is fair to say that he was a seminal figure in American music, and a unique, underexposed and under-appreciated compositional voice.

By programming three representative works by Still in the context of music by two of his teachers, George Whitefield Chadwick and Edgard Varèse, the conductor and musicologist Leon Botstein set out to demonstrate Still's place in the body of American classical music. Botstein, music director of the American Symphony Orchestra, began this concert with Chadwick's Rip Van Winkle Overture. The music is cinematic, though in 1879 it predated motion pictures. Chadwick, a Bostonian, had one foot firmly planted on either side of the Atlantic. The Brahms-on-steroids sound of this piece makes it clear that he was a 19th-century romantic, but his American style began to shine through, even in this youthful work. Under Botstein, the ASO's performance was well executed, if a bit stiff. A lyrical cello solo (Eugene Moye) in the beginning of the piece, and a smooth French horn section at its core immediately proved the excellence of the players.

Still was about 25 when he seized the opportunity to study with Chadwick. By that time, Still was already a professional oboist and an accomplished arranger for W. C. Handy in New York. Not long after, he studied with the adventurous, ultra-modernist Varèse, a French émigré to New York. Varèse encouraged Still's experimentation as well as his flair for lyricism, and helped him get his works performed. Varèse's "Offrandes" (Offerings), the most radical-sounding work in this program, received a solid reading from mezzo-soprano Jennifer Rivera and a percussion-heavy chamber orchestra. Rivera was both dramatic and accurate in this challenging score, a setting of surrealist poems by Jose Juan Tablada and Vicente Huidobro, though she had some trouble projecting over the loudest sections. Varèse's angular phrases were well navigated by Botstein and the players, and a trumpet solo (Carl Albach) was notable for its clean resonance.

With these two pieces – Chadwick's and Varèse's – bracketing the program, Still's music sounded simultaneously modern, traditional and distinctive.

In Still's Darker America, written in 1924, one can hear shades of the romantic era along with a glimmer of a fresh new style. The music is reminiscent of Aaron Copland at times, and hints at jazz rhythms and harmonies at others. Though the ASO sounded somewhat restrained, its ensemble was excellent and the full-bodied timbres were lovely. Still writes exceptionally well for brass and woodwinds, and this piece was a great opportunity to show off the ASO's superb winds.

Written during Still's self-proclaimed "Negroid" period (1926-1934), Africa begins with a timpani solo that immediately brings to mind stereotypical sounds of that continent. A tone poem in three movements, 'Land of Peace', 'Land of Romance' and 'Land of Superstition', Still referred to the piece as "the Africa of my imagination". His expert use of tone colors was likely gleaned from his studies with Chadwick, a master of orchestration. Luscious solos from violin (Erica Kiesewetter), English horn (Alexandra Knoll), bassoon (Charles McCracken) and piano (Elizabeth Wright) were sprinkled through the performance. The ASO plays exceptionally well, but one of the things separating this orchestra from a truly great one is dramatic dynamic contrast. It took some imagination to hear the difference between volume gradations of *mezzo-piano*, *piano* and *pianissimo*.

Still's Symphony No.2 (Song of a New Race), from 1937, was another excellent vehicle to show off the ASO's fine brass. The strings created a truly beautiful sound, especially in the second movement. This is highly

sentimental music, and the orchestra played up the *schmaltz*. Toward the end of the work, the players were noticeably having fun, swinging the syncopated rhythms.

It's apt that the American Symphony Orchestra, whose mission is to present rare and unknown works, would champion the music of this great American composer, William Grant Still. It was gratifying to hear his music in such excellent performances.

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