

Composer William Grant Still arrangements performed by American Symphony Orchestra



William Grant Still

Compiled By Don Thomas

The pioneering African-American composer William Grant Still (1895-1978) ranks among the greatest composers born and educated in the United States, rivaled only by Leonard Bernstein in the variety of his output. On March 22 the American Symphony Orchestra (ASO), celebrates his under-appreciated genius with its Lincoln Center concert "Revisiting William Grant Still."

Performing three of Still's landmark compositions, "Darker America," "Africa," and "Symphony No. 2," along with works by two of his great influences, George Whitefield Chadwick (the concert overture Rip Van Winkle) and Edgard Varèse (Offrandes), the ASO acknowledges Still's important position in musical and African American history.

Often referred to as the dean of African American composers, Still was the first to conduct a major symphony orchestra, the first to have a symphony of his own performed by a leading orchestra and the first to have an opera performed by a major opera company.

Yet despite these achievements, concertgoers today know little about him and rarely encounter his works. True to its mission, the ASO seeks to redress that injustice with this program, which also poses questions about how race has impacted Still's musical legacy. As the ASO's Music Director Leon Botstein explains:

"When this concert ... was scheduled a year and a half ago, those who were betting on who might be the next president of the United States gave

Barack Obama very low odds. ... Eminent African American composers of classical and concert music have been rare, just as the advent of an African American president is unique, at least for now.

"What connects the career of Barack Obama with that of William Grant Still is that they



W.C. Handy

both defy the easy stereotypes we associate with race. ... There is no uniformity in response to the world that the color of one's skin renders inevitable. William Grant Still was an individual who crafted an individual voice ... [and] his own vision of the African American heritage. In the end the promise of individuality and a respect for it commends democracy and freedom to us all."

Still trained and worked with the finest teachers of his day to forge the sound of his "American Experience", composing operas, symphonies, concertos, chamber music, art songs, film scores, and popular music. He was a Mississippian, raised in Little Rock, who studied at Wilberforce College

and Oberlin, and later moved to New York City to work for W.C. Handy.

Catherine Parsons Smith notes in a program essay for this concert that Still sought out the influential George Whitefield Chadwick for composition instruction when Handy's show moved to Boston, and after his return to New York he studied with Edgard Varèse. Varèse, although French, was very Americanized and "encouraged [Still's] lyric gifts, introduced him to modernist scores, challenged him to experiment with form, programmed his music ... and saw that he met conductors who would become his champions."

Although the modernist style influenced his earlier works, Still eventually absorbed and integrated more of the popular African American idiom into his compositions. "Darker America," written in 1924, comes from the compositional period Still himself labeled "Negroid".

In his own program note for the 1924 premiere under Eugene Goossens, the composer wrote: "Darker America is representative of the American Negro, and suggests triumph over sorrows through fervent prayer." He had pulled away from the modernist influence Varèse had exercised and returned to traditional Black sources.

"Africa," the second of his works on the program, written in 1930, was designated "the Africa of my imagination" in a letter from Still to his first conductor, George Barrère. Smith's essay again sheds light:

"As a man of the Harlem Renaissance, [Still] wanted to represent the ancestral and cultural connections of Black Americans. No wonder he struggled long and hard for more than a decade over Africa, and no wonder the work exudes aesthetic integrity even though Still never traveled to that continent."

By the time he composed his "Symphony No. 2," in 1936-7, Still had progressed to a more American view of the African American aesthetic and he had achieved broader recognition; this work was first played by the Philadelphia Orchestra under conductor Leopold Stokowski (founder of

the American Symphony Orchestra).

According to Smith, the Second Symphony's "characteristically expansive, lyrical string writing seems specifically intended to exploit that orchestra's famously silky string sound."

Still's early teacher, George Whitefield Chadwick, is often grouped with the pre-Ives generation of New England composers that included Amy Beach, Arthur Foote, Edward MacDowell, John Knowles Paine, and Horatio Parker. Learn more about this concert and the rest of the season at www.americansymphony.org.

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