

William Grant Still—*Afro-American Symphony*

Much like Jessie Montgomery, William Grant Still saw his career as a composer blossom during one of the most difficult times in American history. In Still's case, it was the Great Depression that propelled him to unlikely acclaim as the so-called "Dean of Afro-American music."

For years prior to the Depression, Still had earned his living as a musical jack-of-all-trades. He performed as an oboist in the pit orchestra for the groundbreaking Eubie Blake and Noble Sissie musical *Shuffle Along*, the first all-Black hit Broadway show; that show has since been credited for launching the so-called "Harlem Renaissance" of the 1920s and 30s. He also served as recording director for the short-lived but acclaimed label Black Swan and was a well-regarded arranger of popular music for radio shows such as Paul Whiteman's *Old Gold Show*.

But outside of those popular idioms, Still had struggled to find a foothold. Despite Antonin Dvorak's famous 1893 proclamation that "the future music of this country must be founded upon what are called the negro melodies," no Black composer—or Black conductor, for that matter—had yet broken through into the orchestra or opera halls of America.

Still had studied at the Oberlin College of Music, and later furthered his classical education under the tutelage of the celebrated French composer Edgard Varèse and American composer George Whitefield Chadwick. His talents were well known, and Varèse in particular had advocated on Still's behalf; yet, aside from participating in some small-scale composer showcases in the 1920s, Still had not found a path into the world of so-called "serious" music.

Then 1929 came along, bringing the most cataclysmic financial crash in US history. The shock impacted every industry, including the music industry: Between 1927 and 1932, record sales dropped by more than 90%. "It was not until the Depression struck," Still explained, "that I went jobless long enough to let the Symphony take shape. In 1930 I rented a room in a quiet building not far from my home in New York and began to work."

In just three months, Still produced what is now recognized as his concert masterpiece: the *Afro-American Symphony*. For inspiration, Still turned to familiar material: The blues music that he had heard, played, arranged, and recorded so many times. The composer recognized that this could doom the symphony's public fate from the outset: At the time, blues and jazz music was often derided in elite white culture as immoral and "the Devil's music."

Still saw it much differently. "The blues were not immoral or trivial," he wrote, "but instead an expression of the hopes and yearnings of a lowly people, wanting a better life." In the journal that contained his sketches for the symphony, Still connected that belief to the music he set out to write and the culture he sought to celebrate: "I seek in the 'Afro-American Symphony' to portray not the higher type of colored American, but the sons of the soil, who still retain so many of the traits peculiar to their African forebears; who have not responded completely to the transforming effect of progress."

This vision caught the imagination of Howard Hanson, the conductor of the Rochester Philharmonic, who had previously been introduced to Still by Edgard Varèse. Hanson

programmed the *Afro-American Symphony* in 1931 as part of his American Composers' Concerts. That performance marked the first time that a major American orchestra played a work by a Black composer...but it would not be the last: In its first 20 years, the *Afro-American Symphony* was performed by 38 orchestras in the US and Europe, making it the most popular symphony composed by any American until that time.

The first movement, titled "Longings," begins with a wistful snippet of melody played on the English horn; a lurching blues ditty played on muted trumpet follows. A second melody, passed back and forth between flute and oboe, brings a more serene and wistful mood. Those two melodies, transposed into different textures and instrumental combinations, make up the core material of the seven-minute first movement.

The second movement, "Sorrows," shifts to a more melancholy mood, with searching melodies played against one another against a generally sparse backdrop. That mood is decisively broken at the outset of the third movement, "Humor," which skips along in a joyful mood punctuated by numerous asides and playful outbursts. The symphony concludes with the emotional fourth movement, "Aspirations," in which lush string writing contrasts with poignant quietude before giving way to an exciting coda.

"With humble thanks to God, the source of inspiration"

I. Moderato assai

"All my life long twell de night has pas'
Let de wo'k come ez it will,
So dat I fin' you, my honey, at last',
Somewhah des ovah de hill."

Paul Laurence Dunbar

II. Adagio

"It's moughty tiahsome layin' 'roun'
Dis sorrer-laden earfly groun'
An' oftentimes I thinks, thinks, I
'Twould be a sweet t'ing des to die
An' go 'long home."

Paul Laurence Dunbar

III. Animato

"An' we'll shout ouah halleluyahs,
On dat mighty reck'nin' day."

Paul Laurence Dunbar

IV. Lento, con risoluzione

“Be proud, my Race, in mind and soul.

Thy name is writ on Glory’s scroll

In characters of fire.

High mid the clouds of Fame’s bright sky

Thy banner’s blazoned folds no fly,

And truth shall lift them higher.”

Paul Laurence Dunbar

“He who develops his God-given gifts with view to aiding humanity, manifests truth.”

-William Grant Still