

# The Multifaceted Nationalism of William Grant Still



by David Z. Kushner

To glean the essence of William Grant Still's contributions to American music, it will be useful to capture briefly the views expressed during the formative years of this country's nationhood about the creativity of African-Americans. Thomas Jefferson, for example, wrote:

*But never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never saw even an elementary trait of*

*painting or sculpture. In music they are more generously gifted than the whites with accurate ears for tune and time, and they have been found capable of imagining a small catch. (The instrument proper to them is the Banjar, which they brought hither from Africa, and which is the original of the guitar, its chords being precisely the four lower chords of the guitar.) Whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of complicated harmony, is yet to be proved.<sup>1</sup>*

Let us fast forward to the early twentieth century and hear from another prominent Virginian, the composer and pianist John Powell, writing under his pseudonym, Richard Brockwell. He expressed the following thoughts:

*The negro [sic] is, au fond, in spite of the surface polish and restraints imposed by close contact with Caucasian civilization, a genuine primitive. His musical utterance, when really direct, not imitative, brings with it always the breath of the tropical jungle. . . . The negro is the child among the peoples, and his music*

*shows the unconscious, unbounded gaiety of the child, as well as the child's humor, sometimes Aesopian, often Rabelaisian. . . . The negro, with all the lovable and simple heart of the child, has also the mentality of the child, the child's lack of inhibitions and restraints; but he has also the physical impulses of the adult human animal to a passionately poignant extent.<sup>2</sup>*

That such attitudes—expressed by persons of position, power and “culture”—were prevalent in American society past and contemporaneous was a source of much consternation on the part of those who, like Still, believed that creation is an individual, not a class, enterprise, and that blanket stereotyping is the bane of modern society. In my view it still is.

William Grant Still ruminated for a while about the struggle for equality in this country, equality not only in terms of cultural attitudes. For too long, indulgence of the Negro was viewed as being supported by the establishment. William C. Handy put it well when he said that if he needed money, it was easily acquired if he pretended he wanted it to purchase liquor or to gamble, but not if its purpose

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was to buy books for his children.<sup>3</sup>

Still was neither a child of the ghetto nor a culturally or educationally deprived person. Although he was exposed to Negro hymns and spirituals sung to him by his maternal grandmother, who lived with the family during his formative years in Little Rock, only later in life did he fully realize their value and potential in terms of serious musical composition. When he was 11, his mother married Charles B. Shepperson. Still was exposed to the world of classical music by attending concerts and operettas with his stepfather and listening to recordings of Italian operas such as *Il Trovatore*, *Rigoletto* and *L'Elisir d'Amore*.

Later, as a student at Wilberforce University in Ohio, he became acquainted with yet another stream in the music world—college band music. Before leaving college, without a degree, Still involved himself in the performance and arrangement of popular music through his associations with such white and black luminaries as W. C. Handy, Sophie Tucker, Donald Voorhies, Willard Robison and Paul Whiteman. When, in the summer of 1916, Still became an arranger for Handy's band, the "Father of the Blues" had already written his "Memphis Blues" as a campaign song for the mayor of Memphis, E. H. Chump. Still's travels with Handy's band drove home the realities of life in a segregated society and, at the same time, led him to a better understanding of Negro music. Describing his work with Handy, Still remarked,

*It brought me closer to Negro music, because... I didn't come in contact much with Negro music until I had become of age and had entered professional work. I had to go out and learn it.... Now, in the blues, I saw this: a unique musical creation of Negroes.... (The blues) were looked down upon.... They were considered to be connected with the dives.... I felt that there was something more in them than that.... I wanted to dignify it through using it in major symphonic composition.<sup>4</sup>*

It is one of the peculiarities, indeed ironies, regarding the use of Negro melodies in serious musical composition, that the Bohemian master, Antonin Dvorák, had suggested such a course for American composers much earlier (1895). The director of the National Conservatory often has been cited for his insights on this subject, but it is worthwhile to read Dvorák's words in context:

*It is a proper question to ask, what songs then, belong to the American and appeal more strongly to him than any others? What melody could stop him on the street if he were in a strange land and make the home feeling well up within him, no matter how hardened he might be or how wretchedly the tune were played? Their number, to be sure, seems to be limited. The most potent as well as the most beautiful among them, according to my estimation, are certain of the so-called plantation melodies and slave songs, all of which are distinguished*



Photos courtesy of William Grant Still Music, Flagstaff, Arizona. Used by permission.

*by unusual and subtle harmonies, the like of which I have found in no other songs but those of old Scotland and Ireland.<sup>5</sup>*

By 1921, Still was playing oboe in the New York production of "Shuffle Along," with music and lyrics by Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle; Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles created the libretto, or "book." It was when this show was in Boston, July–October 1922, that Still began his short-lived period of study with George W. Chadwick, director of the New England Conservatory of Music. But his arrangements for Harry Pace, and his own songs written immediately following the Chadwick experience, reflect his confidence in his skill as a creator of popular songs. Under the pseudonym Willie M. Grant, Still saw three such pieces recorded on the Black Swan label: "How I got dem twilight blues," "Love me in your own time" and "Go get it." In 1923, while working for the Pace Phonograph Company, Still garnered

a scholarship to study with Edgard Varèse. From this modernist, he branched out into alien territory. Given his tutor's avant-garde bent, it is interesting to observe that Still's compositions from his two-year period with this pioneer in new music are largely devoted to African-American subject matter. In 1924, the year George Gershwin composed *Rhapsody in Blue*, Still produced two quite diverse works: *From the Black Belt*, a seven-movement suite, and *Darker America*, a tone poem. The suite received a telling review from Francis Perkins when it was premiered on March 20, 1927, by Georges Barrère and his Little Symphony Orchestra. The critic reported that the conductor warned the audience that Still was a pupil of Varèse, but that "after starting with a suggestion of jazz (the music) seemed unlikely to shock conservative ears."<sup>6</sup> Richard D. Saunders, reviewing a 1936 performance of the same work by the Pacific Institute Symphony Orchestra, found that it "charmingly captured the Southern Negro Spirit,"<sup>7</sup> and that "to secure this the harmony was necessarily banal."<sup>8</sup> Both reviewers echo what many had said throughout Still's career, namely that his instrumentation is ingratiating and reveals skill in mixing instrumental sonorities. With movement titles like "Li'l Scamp" and "Mah Bones is Creakin,'" it would take some doing to make *this* music sound ultramodern. At this time, Varèse was writing *Hyperprisms* and *Octandre*.

*Darker America* is more modern but hardly in the "ultra" category. Olin Downes, while proclaiming it the best music on the International Composer's Guild concert given at New York's Aeolian Hall at its premiere on November 29, 1926, complained about its lack of development and organic growth, a familiar charge; however, Downes liked the atmosphere and feeling of the music, and he found "more than ingenious" the theme's polyharmonic treatment at the beginning and in the closing measure. On a personal note, it is important to mention the comments made by Louise Varèse, the composer's wife, about a social event hosted by Still following the concert:

*Still gave a dinner at his house in Harlem (wonderful fried chicken) in honor of Varèse and afterward a very large and formal reception with all the women in elaborate evening gowns. It was a very dignified and even solemn occasion. Varèse and I stood together and were introduced individually in*

*an exactly repeated formula to each one of the fifty or more guests. Still, as well as many of his dark guests, had ceremonious and even courtly manners that would have graced any embassy or king's court—the genetic memory of ancestral pride and ritualistic formality.*<sup>10</sup>

In 1930, *Darker America* was panned more pointedly by Stewart D. Sabin, who found it technically deficient. He was displeased with its mix of “passages that bespeak imaginative inspiration and poignant feeling to others that sound contrived with little of either.”<sup>11</sup> It is instructive to note John Powell’s *Rhapsodie Nègre*, composed six years earlier (1918) than Still’s “Afro” compositions, was lauded by critics for excellence in formal design, for integration of the Negro hymns “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “I Want to be Ready” into the symphonic fabric, and for the sonic frenzy of a voodoo orgy; the inclusion of a ragtime tune Powell had heard as a student at the University of Virginia and the syncopated jazz rhythms also are duly noted. Within three years, Powell’s opus received some fifty performances under such maestros as Sir Donald Francis Tovey, Pierre Monteux and Walter Damrosch. Still, on the other hand, continued to struggle with an image problem; he was viewed more as a skillful arranger than a first-rate composer.

The *Afro-American Symphony* (1930) did much to change perceptions about the man from Woodville, Mississippi. But even here, Richard D. Saunders, who liked the word banal, found occasion to use it again in his review of the fourth movement of the symphony when performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra on April 28, 1936, in Los Angeles. Saunders’s positive remarks were followed by the following cheap shot: “The climax was dynamic and effective, but the modulation preceding it was banal, with some quite unnecessary and (silly) contrasting jazz treatment which somewhat let the work down in that place.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, the reviewer for *Musical Courier*, commenting on a performance by the New York Philharmonic-Symphony, found, “The entire work displays an expert hand and rare taste in a refined method of workmanship, which avoids any suggestion of the banal.”<sup>13</sup> Olin Downes, reviewing the same Philharmonic concert, concludes that other works by Still are better. He finds, “There is little true development in this symphony.... The composition wavers, in a word, between the symphonic intention

and the style of purely popular music.”<sup>14</sup> It can be argued that preconceptions and justifications of earlier opinions clouded objective appraisal. By and large, the *Afro-American Symphony* was well-received and has been promoted by such renowned baton wielders as Howard Hanson, who gave the work its world premiere on October 29, 1931, with the Rochester Philharmonic, Leopold Stokowski and, more recently, Neemi Järvi.

Still, having proven to himself and to the musical world what he could achieve, moved on to create a large body of music artfully reflecting his interest in all the world’s musical traditions. He stated his thinking as follows:

*If I have a wish to express, it would be that my music may serve a purpose*

*larger than mere music. If it will help in some way to bring about better interracial understanding in America and in other countries, then I will feel that the work is justified. It is not that a race of people should be glorified, but rather that all people should accept all other people on the basis of their individual merit and accomplishment. It is that we are all human beings, citizens, children of God. We need to learn more about each other so that we all may live together in peace and mutual appreciation. Can music help accomplish this? I believe it can.*<sup>15</sup>

In a series of multicultural works for diverse performing media, Still found his true voice. Whereas his five symphonies were sometimes maligned for their

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

- 1** *And They Lynched Him on a Tree*  
Hilda Harris, mezzo-soprano; William Warfield, narrator; The Ensemble Singers of the Plymouth Music Series of Minnesota; Leigh Morris Chorale; Philip Brunelle, conductor  
Collins Classics 14542
- 2** *Wailing Women*  
Yolanda Williams, soprano; The Chorus and Orchestra of the Plymouth Music Series of Minnesota; Philip Brunelle, conductor  
Collins Classics 14542
- 3** *Symphony No. 1 “Afro-American”*  
Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Neeme Järvi, conductor  
Chandos 9154
- 4** *Symphony No. 2 “Song of a New Race”*  
Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Neemi Järvi, conductor
- 5** *Folk Suite No. 1 for string quartet, flute and piano*  
New Zealand String Quartet; Alexa Still, flute; Susan DeWitt Smith, piano  
Koch 3-7192-1H1
- 6** *Folk Song Suite No. 4 for flute, clarinet, cello and piano*  
Leonard Garrison, flute; Robert Umiker, clarinet; Samuel Magill, cello; Arthur Tollefson, piano  
Cambria CD-1060
- 7** *Three Rhythmic Spirituals*  
Schola Cantorum of the University of Arkansas, Jack Groh, conductor  
Cambra CD-1060
- 8** *La Guiablesse (ballet)*  
Berliner Symphoniker, Isaiah Jackson, conductor  
Koch 3-7154-2H1
- 9** *Sahdji (ballet)*  
Eastman-Rochester Orchestra and Chorus, Howard Hanson, conductor  
Mercury 434-324-2
- 10** *Miniatures for flute, oboe and piano*  
Gretel Shanley, flute; Peter Christ, oboe; Sharon Davis, piano  
Crystal CD-321
- 11** *From the Delta (wind symphony)*  
Northern Arizona University Wind Symphony, Patricia J. Hoy, conductor  
NAUWS-001



alleged technical or formal deficiencies, Still's smaller-scaled works bridge the gap between folk and art music.

The brotherhood of mankind and the difficulty of its realization are the themes of the powerful *And They Lynched Him on a Tree*, composed in Los Angeles in 1940 and premiered on June 25 of that year at New York's Lewisohn Stadium. This work speaks to its times; shortly before the first performance, the United States House of Representatives passed the Gavagan Anti-Lynching Bill. Three months later, however, the bill was abandoned by the United States Senate. The text of Still's work, by Katherine Garrison Chapin, the wife of Francis Biddle, who was serving as the attorney general of the United States under Franklin Delano Roosevelt at a time when segregation was legally sanctioned in the South, sent a potent message to those in authority and lent a ray of hope to those who endured silently. It is significant that Still specifies, in the piano-vocal score, that there be two choruses, one white, one Negro. The narrator's part is to be spoken according to the rhythmic notation on the staff. The score also calls for an alto soloist and optional off-stage sounds to depict starting automobiles and auto horns. The orchestra, which includes harp, is traditional.

Six years later, in 1946, the composer produced two important works on divergent Jewish themes, *Psalm 29 (Mizmor l'David)*, which is titled *Voice of the Lord*, was composed for the Park Avenue Synagogue in New York. Scored for mixed chorus, tenor and organ, it was premiered at the synagogue with its cantor, David Putterman, singing the tenor solo. With a basic tonality of A minor, but with the raised fourth (D-sharp) and perfect fifth conjuring imagery of the shofar, the voice of the Lord—and of Still—is heard in full majesty. His second Jewish work, *Wailing Woman*, is more personal. With text by Verna Arvey, it is dedicated to the memory of Jo-Jo Solomon, son of the conductor Izler Solomon. A powerful and poignant mini-jeremiad, *Wailing Woman* touches on the commonality of Jews and Christians, blacks and whites, as well as the racial and religious divide that has, regrettably, informed their relationships. Clearly inspired by the moving text, Still provides melismatic cantorial lines, the telling augmented second, notably on the Hebrew word for God, *Adonay*, and an orchestra aglow with color. The solo soprano wails and declaims the plight of the Jew, despised through the ages, while the chorus exudes empathy in a richly textured modality. This is a Still far removed from

the image he evoked in the past and the image with which he is associated today. In 1962, when the musician again turned to Jewish culture, both he and the music are in a happy mood. The two Hebraic songs, *Artsah Alini* and *Ayzeh Peleh*, incorporated in the third movement of *Folk Suite No. 1* for flute, string quartet and piano, are hora dances. Here we catch a glimpse of the celebratory Jew, his woes put aside at least for the moment. This *Suite*, dedicated to Joachim Chassman, is a good example of Still's eclectic approach to multicultural ingredients. The first movement consists of two Brazilian song types: *Bambalele*, from northern Brazil, features syncopated rhythms; *Espingarda*, also associated with northern Brazil, is a dance song not unlike the samba of the southern part of that vast country.



*Folk Suite No. 4* for flute, clarinet, cello and piano, also dating from 1962, offers insight into Still's treatment of exclusively Hispanic culture. Venezuela, Mexico and Brazil are represented, respectively, in the three movements. In the third movement, *Tayêras*, to cite a specific example, we hear a religious song akin to a Negro spiritual, but livelier. The *tayêras* are three women: Each one in turn sings a couplet and is answered by the other two singing the refrain.

*Miniatures* for flute, oboe and piano was composed in 1948 but not published until 1963; dedicated to Lady and Sir John Barbirolli, songs of Mexico, Peru and North America are featured. The set includes the Negro spiritual, "Jesus is a Rock in a Weary Land," the cowboy song, "I Ride an Old Paint," and the popular American folk tune, "A Frog Went a'Courtin'."

*Symphony No. 3*, also known as *The Sunday Symphony* (1958), is an effort to depict musically the worship activities of a typical Sunday from the composer's personal perspective. Each of the four movements has both a tempo indication and a descriptive title: 1. Moderato—*The Awakening*; 2. Very Slow—*Prayer*; 3. Gaily—*Relaxation*; 4.

Resolutely—*Day's End and a New Beginning*.

While one could cite various and sundry works to exemplify Still's involvement with and commitment to a multicultural approach to a communicative music, suffice it to say that, in the long arch of history, time had passed Still by. He left his brief flirtation with the avant-garde in the 1920s, and he had the fortitude to march to his own drumbeat. Verna Arvey, the composer's second wife, made the following assessment of their outlook on life:

"Money? We wanted it and needed it, but we didn't starve and we had a roof over our heads. We had the love of our family and friends. Money would be only the frosting on the cake, and who needs frosting when the cake is so good? We wouldn't have been willing to exchange what we had, not for a billion dollars."<sup>16</sup>

Leopold Stokowski, a London-born son of a Polish father and an Irish mother, held the view that Still's blending of diverse racial and cultural strains into one mainstream is a concept important for the future of American music. It is, indeed, true that Americans derive from so many racial currents that it is a *sine qua non* that ways must be found to harmonize them without a loss of their uniqueness.<sup>17</sup>

It always has been a central credo of Still's that the communicative power of music is uppermost in his creative thinking. Each day was for him a new beginning, yet another opportunity to serve the Creator of all and through Him to serve humanity by doing what he did best and enjoyed most.

AMT

#### NOTES

1. Thomas Jefferson. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. (Boston: Lilly and Wait, 1832), pp. 146–147.

2. Richard Brockwell. Program notes for John Powell's *Rhapsodie Nègre*. Boston Symphony Orchestra Program Book (December 29–30, 1922), pp. 654, 656, 658. The notes accompanied the first performance of the work on March 23, 1918, in New York, on which occasion Powell was piano soloist, and Modest Altschuler conducted the Russian Symphony Orchestra.

3. This anecdote was relayed by Still in "A Composer's Viewpoint," *William Grant Still and the Fusion of Culture in American Music*, edited by Robert B. Haas, (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1972), p. 125.

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4. Quoted from interviews of Still by R. Donald Brown on November 13, 1967, and December 4, 1967, transcript, "Negro Serious Music," edited by Judith Anne Still, California Black Oral History Project (Fullerton: California State University), pp. 7–8, 29. Reprinted in Carolyn L. Quin, "Biographical Sketch of William Grant Still," in Judith Anne Still, Michael J. Dabrishus and Carolyn L. Quin, *William Grant Still: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, Connecticut, and London: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 18.

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