

# PRELUDE

APRIL 2024 • MASTERWORKS #7



## Vivaldi's Gloria April 12 - 14, 2024

"Together we rise, or not at all." This quote from William Grant Still, a man of many firsts in the world of music, is as relevant today as it was a hundred years ago. Still's determination to pursue his passion for music, despite his mother's insistence that he pursue a degree in medicine, has given the world a trove of magnificent compositions that continue to find new audiences and new advocates, nearly fifty years after his passing.



William Grant Still

William Grant Still was born on May 11, 1895, in Woodsville, Mississippi, to parents who were teachers and musicians.<sup>i</sup> He was the first generation of his family not born into slavery. One of his ancestors, William Still, was a well-known abolitionist and conductor on the Underground Railroad.<sup>ii</sup> Sadly, Still was only a few months old when his father died. Alone and struggling, his mother moved back to her family in Little Rock, Arkansas, where she secured a job teaching English in the local high school.<sup>iii</sup> Still was raised by his mother and grandmother. When he was nine years old, Still's mother remarried and the young boy gained a stepfather who nurtured his interest in music.<sup>iv</sup> His stepfather collected and played "Victor Red Seal" records, a premium label that represented the highest level of classical music recordings, including opera.<sup>v</sup> He took his stepson to live performances, and the young teenager quickly became enamored with both music and theater.<sup>vi</sup> At the age of 15, Still began violin lessons with a private teacher, and he quickly taught himself to play clarinet, saxophone, oboe, bass, cello and viola.<sup>vii</sup>

Still's mother took an active role in the social and cultural leadership of the community, and she avidly fought for community-wide literacy.<sup>viii</sup> She had a grand plan for her son to become a doctor and take his place as a community leader.<sup>ix</sup> To please his mother, Still enrolled in Wilberforce University, the nation's first private historically Black university for pre-med students.<sup>x</sup> But his heart was not in a medical career, and Still spent most of his time conducting the band, composing and arranging.<sup>xi</sup> Most of

his funds were used to purchase any number of musical instruments.<sup>xii</sup>

In 1915, at the age of 20, Still left Wilberforce without a degree, determined to pursue a career in music.<sup>xiii</sup> His talent, in combination with a stroke of good luck, gave Still work playing oboe and cello with an orchestra in Cleveland.<sup>xiv</sup> He managed to "gig" around the city, living job to job, and it was during this time that he composed his first piece, the *American Suite*. He sent his composition (unsolicited) to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra,<sup>xv</sup> and while it was not performed, the boldness of the 20-year-old was remarkable.

In the same year, 1915, Still was hired to arrange music for one of the bands of W.C. Handy, who is known as the "Father of the Blues."<sup>xvi</sup> In addition to his work as an arranger, Still played both oboe and cello in the band. He and Handy became lifelong friends, and it was Still who created the first-ever band arrangements of Handy's historic "Beale Street Blues" and "St. Louis Blues."<sup>xvii</sup>

At the age of 21, Still enrolled in Oberlin Conservatory.<sup>xviii</sup> His talent was so remarkable that arrangements were made for Still to study privately with the composition professor at no cost.<sup>xix</sup> His studies were cut short by Still's enlistment in the U.S. Navy during World War I. At the end of the war, Still returned to Ohio to continue his studies at Oberlin, but a call from W. C. Handy soon brought him back to New York City, where he again took a major role in Handy's



Still (holding case) at Wilberforce, 1915

bands. In 1921, Still was working as an oboist in the pit for *Shuffle Along*, created by composer Eubie Blake, a history-making musical with an all-Black cast. Other musicians noted Still's talents, and he found himself working for Artie Shaw, Sophie Tucker, and Paul Whiteman, among countless others.<sup>xx</sup>



Cast and musicians of *Shuffle Along*, 1921

While in Boston performing with the *Shuffle Along* orchestra, Still was accepted to study with George Chadwick, then Director of the New England Conservatory of Music (NEC).<sup>xxi</sup> Florence Price had studied with him when she attended that institution.<sup>xxii</sup> Most important to Still was that Chadwick advocated the ideals that were championed by Czech composer Antonin Dvořák, in the 1890s when he directed the prestigious National Conservatory of Music in New York. Chadwick, like Dvořák, believed in the importance of an “American sound” in music that would have to come from Native American and African American musical traditions.<sup>xxiii</sup>



*Afro-American Symphony*

In 1930, when he was 35 years old, Still's dream to create a symphonic work based on what he termed the “Negroid idiom” was realized with his creation of the *Afro-American Symphony*. It was the first symphony by a Black composer to be performed by a major U.S. orchestra when it was premiered in 1931 by the Rochester Philharmonic.<sup>xxiv</sup> It was subsequently performed by the New York Philharmonic and hundreds of other orchestras.<sup>xxv</sup> Still's unique style was already apparent, and it can be said that Gershwin's famous “I Got Rhythm” owes its famous melodic line to an earlier, almost identical, line by Still.<sup>xxvi</sup>

In 1939, Still married Verna Avery, a journalist and concert pianist who became his principal collaborator.<sup>xxvii</sup> They settled in Los Angeles where he began to arrange music for movies, working on *Pennies From Heaven* (1936) and Frank Capra's *Lost Horizon*.<sup>xxviii</sup> Although he was hired to work on *Stormy Weather*, which showcased Lena Horne and Cab Calloway, he quit working for 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox because of their poor treatment of people of color.<sup>xxix</sup> Still lived in Los Angeles until his death in 1978 at the age of 83, following a series of heart attacks and strokes.

Today, Still is called the “Dean of African American Composers” for the many firsts he achieved during a long and substantial career.<sup>xxx</sup>

- He was the first Black composer in the United States to have a symphony performed by a major orchestra.<sup>xxxi</sup>
- In 1936, Still became the first Black man to conduct a major U.S. symphony when he conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra in his compositions at the Hollywood Bowl.<sup>xxxii</sup>
- Still was the first Black musician to conduct a major symphony orchestra in the deep south when, in 1955, he directed the New Orleans Philharmonic.<sup>xxxiii</sup>
- He was the first Black musician to conduct a white radio orchestra in New York City.<sup>xxxiv</sup>
- Still was the first Black composer to have an opera produced by a major U.S. company when his opera, *Troubled Island*, was performed by New York City Opera in 1949, ten years after he finished it.<sup>xxxv</sup> The opera, with a libretto by poet Langston Hughes, is set in Haiti in 1791, and tells the story of the Haitian revolution and the revolutionary leader, Jean-Jacques Dessalines.
- Three years after his death, another opera, *A Bayou Legend*, became the first opera by a Black composer to be performed on national television.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Still went on to earn multiple honorary degrees (Master of Music and Doctor of Music) from Howard University, Oberlin College, Bates College, Pepperdine, the New England Conservatory of Music, the Peabody Conservatory and the University of Southern California, to name just a few.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Still composed more than 150 pieces (which would total more than 200, counting his lost early works) including operas, ballets (his 1930 ballet, *Sahdji*, is set in Africa and was composed after his extensive study of African music), symphonies, chamber works, plus instrumental, choral and solo vocal works.<sup>xxxviii</sup>



William Grant Still

In his later years, reflecting on his mother's disappointment with his decision to become a professional composer, Still wrote, "... In her experience, the majority of Black musicians were disreputable and were not accepted into the best homes."<sup>xxxix</sup> Luckily, Still's mother lived to see his enormous success, and took pride in her son's achievements. In speaking of his mother, Still observed,

"... her pride knew no bounds. Although she had opposed my career in music, she finally understood that music meant to me all the things she had been teaching me: a creative, serious accomplishment worthy of study and high devotion as well as sacrifice. She knew at last that the ideals which she had passed on to me during my boyhood in Arkansas had borne worthy fruit."<sup>xi</sup>

Despite his outstanding talent and prodigious output, Still struggled financially for most of his career.<sup>xii</sup> There was a noticeable decline in attention to his music following the 1949 production of *Troubled Island*.<sup>xiii</sup> By the time of his death in 1978, Still was largely forgotten and deeply saddened that he had failed to see his vision of racial harmony realized.<sup>xiiii</sup> Much of what we know of Still's music today we owe to his daughter, Judith Anne Still, who made it her life's mission to resurrect her father's legacy because, "His (Still's) greatest desire was that his music would serve to create racial harmony."<sup>xiv</sup>



William Grant Still (left) with WC Handy (seated, center) and other musicians

Still's motto,

# "Together we rise, or not at all,"<sup>xlv</sup>

remains an aspiration and  
an inspiration to us all.

## JOIN US!

Please join the HSO on April 12-14, 2024, to hear four inspirational works that include Still's *Spirituals: A Medley*, Lalo's *Symphonie espagnole* performed by HSO's concertmaster, Leonid Sigal, Bernstein's "Make Our Garden Grow" from *Candide*, and Vivaldi's *Gloria*, RV589, one of sacred music's most uplifting choral works.

**Did you borrow this *Prelude*? Get your own free copy! Whether you're a ticket buyer, donor, curious about the music, or know someone who is, just send an email to [dshulansky@hartfordsymphony.org](mailto:dshulansky@hartfordsymphony.org). We'll make sure you receive *Prelude* by email, in advance of each HSO Masterworks concert!**



**Are you interested in learning more about our featured artists? Please click on the links for some delightful treats!**

Enjoy a recording of Gustavo Dudamel conducting the LA Philharmonic in a performance of the second movement, *Sorrow*, from Still's *Afro-American Symphony*:

**[Gustavo Dudamel - LA Phil SOUND/STAGE: William Grant Still, Afro-American Symphony, II. "Sorrow" \(youtube.com\)](#)**

If you are intrigued, enjoy the full version by the Detroit Symphony, conducted by Neeme Järvi and listen for the musical theme that became Gershwin's *I Got Rhythm*:

**[Symphony No.1 in A flat major "Afro-American" - William Grant Still \(youtube.com\)](#)**

Enjoy bass-baritone Wendel Stephens performing the aria, *I Dream a World*, from the opera *A Trouble Island*:

**[I Dream A World from William Grant Still's, "A Troubled Island" \(youtube.com\)](#)**



**WONDERING HOW THE MUSIC OF OUR FEATURED CONCERT WILL SOUND? Try HSO'S LISTENING GUIDE, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage – and more!**

In the midst of the pandemic, the Akron Symphony released a performance of *Spirituals: A Medley* that may be viewed by clicking on the video at the top of the page that opens in the link:

**[Spirituals: A Medley - Akron Symphony Orchestra](#)**

Delight in this performance of Lalo's *Symphonie espagnole* by the brilliant soloist Augustin Hadelich with the Orchestre national de France:

**[Lalo : Symphonie espagnole \(Orchestre national de France et Augustin Hadelich\) \(youtube.com\)](#)**

Enjoy this beautiful rendition of "Make our Garden Grow" from a performance at the BBC Proms:

**[Bernstein: Candide - 'Make our Garden Grow' - BBC Proms - YouTube](#)**

Watch this performance of Vivaldi's Gloria, RV 589, performed by the Croatian Baroque Ensemble and soloists of the Libera Classical Orchestra:

**[Vivaldi - Gloria \(RV 589\) - YouTube](#)**

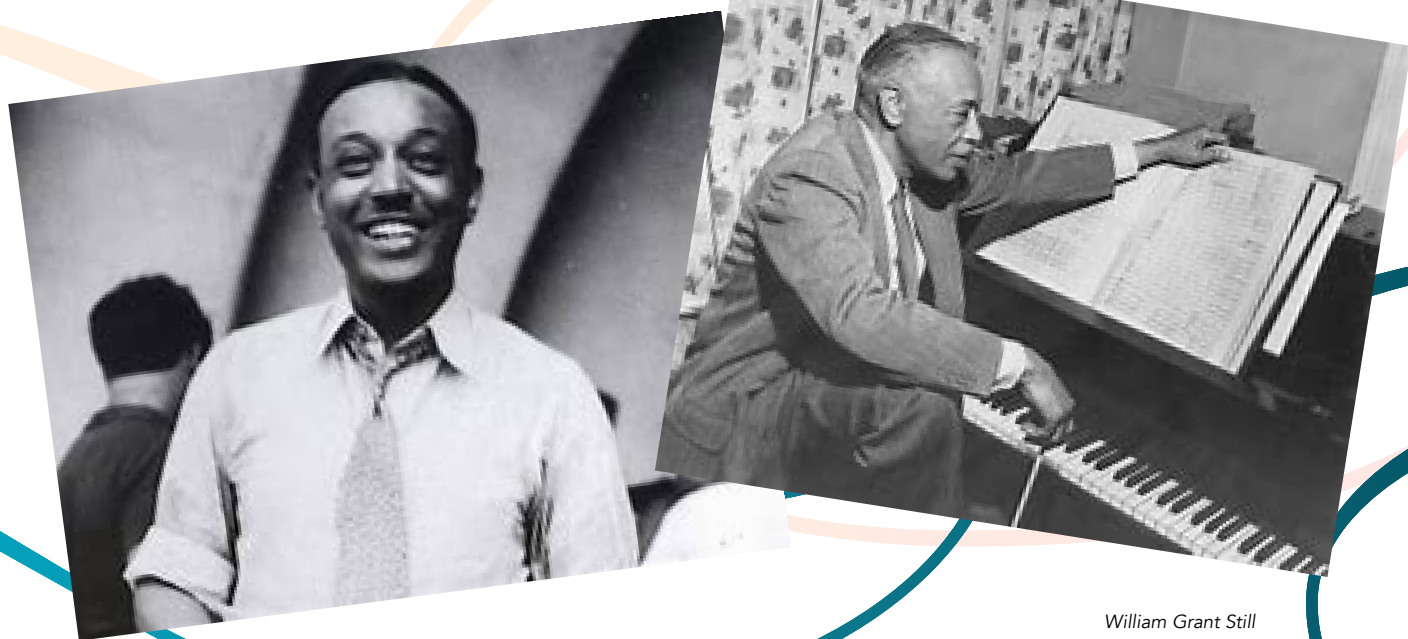
# CASEY'S CLASSICS

Want the best recordings of the pieces you'll experience on the concert program? **Coleman Casey**, HSO's dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers his recording recommendations of selections featured in our upcoming Masterworks Concert.

Lalo's catchy *Symphonie espagnole* is not often heard in concert, so it is a pleasant treat to have it programmed for this series of concerts. Itzhak Perlman and the Orchestre de Paris, under the baton of his friend, Daniel Barenboim, captured this music with delicious wit and flair (DG).

Vivaldi's Gloria also rarely gets an outing in an orchestral concert, but its incredible tunefulness is always welcome, and never more so than as performed by Simon Preston and the Academy of Ancient Music (DECCA).

Bernstein's incredible closing number from his comic opera *Candide* ("Make our Garden Grow") is overwhelmingly moving in his complete recording with soloists, chorus and the London Symphony Orchestra (DG).



William Grant Still

## REFERENCES

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