

# PRELUDE

FEBRUARY 2025 • MASTERWORKS #5



HARTFORD  
SYMPHONY  
ORCHESTRA

## Sirena Plays Sibelius – February 14–16, 2025

Our last *Masterworks Prelude* for December 2024 featured the composer Margaret Bonds, and it is entirely fitting that our next edition of *Prelude* be dedicated to one of her teachers and mentors, William Levi Dawson. During his lifetime, William Dawson achieved recognition for his astonishing contributions to music, yet he is almost unknown to symphony audiences today.



William Levi Dawson

Dawson was born on September 26, 1899, in Anniston, Alabama. His father, George Dawson, was a former slave and an illiterate day laborer, and William was the first of seven children born to George and his wife, Eliza Starkey Dawson. Young Dawson's strong attraction to music quickly became evident and was a driving force in Dawson's life. In 1912, at the age of thirteen, young Dawson boldly ran away from home, determined to study music as a pre-college student at Tuskegee Institute. Without money of his own or parental support, Dawson supported himself with manual labor, working in the school's Agricultural Division. Dawson was a member of Tuskegee's band and orchestra, and for five years, he composed and traveled extensively with the Tuskegee singers, earning extra money as the music librarian. By the time Dawson graduated from Tuskegee's high school division in 1921, he had learned to play just about every instrument.

Dawson's next four years were spent earning a Bachelor of Music degree. He took classes in composition and orchestration at Washburn College in Topeka and studied theory and counterpoint at the Horner Institute of Fine Arts in Kansas City, Missouri. Although he graduated with a degree in music theory and composition in 1925, he was not allowed on stage to receive his diploma. While still an undergraduate, Dawson displayed his genius for chamber music composition and supported himself through those

years by working as the director of music at Kansas Vocational College in Topeka, and at Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Missouri.

In 1926, Dawson moved to Chicago to continue his studies in music at the Chicago Musical College, which has since become a division of Roosevelt University. By 1927, he had completed a Master of Music degree at the now defunct American Conservatory of Music in Chicago. He earned a position as the principal trombonist of the Chicago Civic Orchestra, a post he held from 1926 to 1930. In 1929, Dawson won several band director contests sponsored by the Chicago Daily News and in 1930, won the Wanamaker prize for his songs "Jump Back, Honey, Jump Back" and "Scherzo."

In 1928, Dawson suffered the tragic loss of his wife, Cornella Lampton, during the first year of their marriage. He found solace in his music and in September of 1930, he accepted an invitation from Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) to direct their School of Music, a position he held for 25 years until his retirement in 1955. Dawson eventually remarried, and on September 21, 1935, was wed to the former Cecile DeMae Nicholson of Watonga, Oklahoma.

Under Dawson's leadership, the 100-voice Tuskegee Choir became a world-class ensemble and gained international fame and recognition. With Dawson as



William Levi Dawson

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Tuskegee Choir

conductor, the Choir became known for its headline-making performance at the grand opening of Radio City Music Hall in New York in 1932 and on that auspicious occasion, the Tuskegee Choir was the main attraction. In the same year, the Choir performed at the White House for President Herbert Hoover and for future president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, at his home in Hyde Park. In 1946, the famed Tuskegee Choir became the first African American group to perform at Constitution Hall, the very same hall that, in 1939, refused to permit the Black opera singer, Marian Anderson, to perform for an integrated audience, a refusal that resulted in Anderson's famous concert at the Lincoln Memorial.

The reputation of Dawson's talented Tuskegee Choir brought enormous acclaim to him, to the school, and to the United States. At the request of the U.S. State Department, the Tuskegee Choir embarked on an international concert tour to Britain, Europe and the Soviet Union. Dawson made multiple guest appearances throughout the United States and the State Department repeatedly sent him abroad as a guest conductor. Dawson was awarded honorary doctorates from Tuskegee Institute (1956), Lincoln University in Pennsylvania (1978) and Ithaca College (1982).

Dawson is known for the many choral works he composed for the Tuskegee Choir, such as "Ezekiel Saw the Wheel," "Jesus Walked the Lonesome Valley," and "King Jesus Is a-Listening," and many others, which were published under Dawson's recording business, Imprint Music Press.



However, Dawson likely achieved his greatest renown as a composer for *Negro Folk Symphony*. In writing the piece, Dawson was inspired by the words of famed Czech composer, Antonin Dvořák,

who famously exhorted American composers to find their distinctive voice by drawing on Black American and Native American folk music. Dawson took those words to heart and set about composing a symphony that would reflect his voice and his experiences.

The biography of Dawson by Mark Hugh Malone, observes that Dawson said that he "wanted the world to know that an African American, a Black man, had composed a symphony." Malone explains that Dawson included the word 'Negro' in the title because "in his [Dawson's] day, he refused to say Black or African American, because he believed that 'Negro' was the word for his race in all the Romance languages, so he preferred 'Negro.'"

In an interview with the *Chicago Defender*, Dawson said:

**"I've not tried to imitate Beethoven or Brahms, Franck or Ravel, but to just be myself. To me, the finest compliment that could be paid my symphony when it has its premiere is that it unmistakably is not the work of a white man. I want the audience to say, 'Only a Black man could have written that.'"**

Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony* was premiered in 1934 by the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of Leopold Stokowski. The symphony brought the audience to its feet, and at the conclusion of the performance, the 35-year-old composer was called to the stage multiple times to take bows. Stokowski conducted four back-to-back performances of the piece, one of which was nationally broadcast by CBS radio, making Dawson the first Black composer whose work was featured in a national radio broadcast. The immediate success should have made Dawson a household name, but after just a handful of performances over the next 18 months, the work inexplicably dropped off the radar. Dawson never wrote another symphony.

Nearly twenty years later, Dawson visited seven countries in West Africa to study indigenous African music and, following that trip, he revised his symphony with a rhythmic foundation inspired by the African influences he heard. The revised symphony, also



William Levi Dawson

conducted by Leopold Stokowski, was recorded in 1961. Dr. Gwynne Brown, who has done extensive research on Dawson for a book, commented:

“He [Dawson] ran away from home as a young teenager to attend Tuskegee Institute, and he left a promising career as a trombonist in Chicago to return to Tuskegee in 1930 and create a school of music there. He was a devoted teacher and mentor to many young Black musicians. He knew that the rigorous training he could provide, along with helping them to develop their self-discipline and resilience and ambition, could help make sure that their talents and potential wouldn’t go to waste in a society that was ready to undervalue and discourage them.”

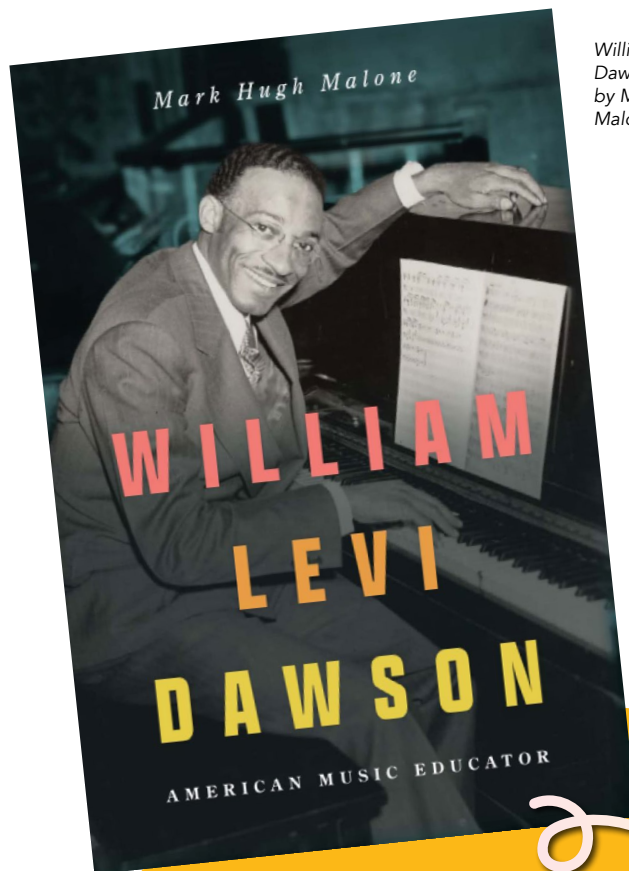
The original 1934 recording was hailed by the New York World Telegram for its “imagination, warmth, drama... and sumptuous orchestration.” This recording may be heard here: [William Dawson - Negro Folk Symphony \(1934\) \(youtube.com\)](#)

William Levi Dawson received the Alumni Merit Award from the Tuskegee Institute in 1983. On May 12, 1989, he received the prestigious Tuskegee University Board of Trustees Distinguished Service Award and, in September of 1989, he was honored by Tuskegee University as part of his 90th birthday celebration.

Dawson passed away less than a year later, on May 2, 1990, at the age of 90, in Montgomery, Alabama. He is buried in the Tuskegee University cemetery and his legacy lives on through the Tuskegee University Golden Voices Choir which he began and directed nearly a century earlier.

His papers, which are available for public viewing, are on deposit in the Robert W. Woodruff Library at Emory University and are catalogued here: [ArchivesSpace Public Interface | ArchivesSpace Public Interface \(emory.edu\)](#)

While Dawson’s undeniable gift as a choral conductor and composer will never be forgotten, his symphonic work, *Negro Folk Symphony*, must be remembered as further evidence of his genius.



William Levi Dawson's book by Mark Hugh Malone

# JOIN US!

Please join the HSO on February 14 – 16, 2025, to hear William Dawson’s *Negro Folk Symphony*, and our guest artist, Sirena Huang, perform the electrifying *Concerto for Violin in D minor* by Sibelius. The HSO will also perform Richard Strauss’ thrilling tone poem, *Don Juan*, that portrays the adventures of the legendary lover, all under the direction of HSO’s Music Director, Carolyn Kuan.

**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!**

## Interested in the music of William Dawson? We have a few suggestions we think you'll enjoy:

Delight in a performance of *Ezekiel Saw the Wheel* performed by the Tuskegee Institute Choir:

[Ezekiel Saw the Wheel arr. William Dawson \(youtube.com\)](#)

Here is yet another piece by Dawson, *King Jesus is A-listening*, performed by the Tuskegee Institute Choir:

[King Jesus is A-listening arr. William L. Dawson \(youtube.com\)](#)

The Iowa Wesleyan Chapel may be heard here, performing *Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit*:

[Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit arr. William Dawson \(youtube.com\)](#)

If you'd like a conductor's view of Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony*, please enjoy a discussion about the piece between Jennifer Randolph, William Dawson's great-niece, and Yannick Nézet-Séguin:

[Yannick Nézet-Séguin Discusses William Dawson's Negro Folk Symphony \(youtube.com\)](#)

If you are interested in a video exploring the life of William Dawson, we recommend this short piece, Episode 7, of the Black Excellence Series:

[Ep.7 William Dawson - Black Excellence Series \(youtube.com\)](#)



## 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!

Enjoy a performance of Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony* performed in 2013 by the Gateway Music Festival in Rochester, NY, conducted by the late Michael Morgan:

[2013 Gateways Music Festival Orchestra Concert \(youtube.com\)](#)

Enjoy violinist Hilary Hahn performing Sibelius' Violin Concerto:

[Sibelius : violin concerto \(Hilary Hahn\) \(youtube.com\)](#)

This electrifying performance of Strauss' *Don Juan* is sure to make you sit up and take notice!

[Richard Strauss : Don Juan, poème symphonique \(Philharmonique de Radio France\) \(youtube.com\)](#)



Sonata by Dawson

# 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.

Dawson's **Negro Folk Symphony** has been splendidly recorded by Neeme Järvi and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (CHANDOS).

Richard Strauss's **Don Juan** has all the panache that one could hope for in this early tone poem as interpreted by Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (RCA).

When it comes to Sibelius' **Violin Concerto**, no one has ever matched Jascha Heifetz's commanding brilliance accompanied by Walter Hendl and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (RCA).



Smith and Dawson



William Levi Dawson



William Levi Dawson

## SOURCE MATERIAL

<https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/dawson-william-levi-1898-1990/>

[http://africandiasporamusicproject.org/william\\_dawson](http://africandiasporamusicproject.org/william_dawson)

<https://aaregistry.org/story/william-dawson-international-composer-and-conductor-of-renown/>

<https://www.alamhof.org/williamldawson>

<https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2020/06/26/883011513/someone-finally-remembered-william-dawsons-negro-folk-symphony>

<https://www.allclassical.org/black-history-month-william-levi-dawson/>

<https://cso.org/experience/article/16298/composer-william-levi-dawson-and-his-enduring>

<https://historianspeaks.org/f/william-levi-dawson-black-composer>