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William Grant Still: The Complex Career of a Complicated Composer

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William Grant Still: The Complex Career of a Complicated Composer

The phrase “practicing what you preach” is often used to describe someone whose actions throughout their lifetime corresponds to their personal beliefs. In other words, a person who practices what they preach maintains a certain set of values that they follow in day to day life, whether this be through their work, relationships, etc. Their decisions are often greatly influenced by their personal set of beliefs. The African American composer William Grant Still, who composed works for the concert hall, including “symphonies (five of them), one-movement tone poems, multi-movement suites for orchestra, ballet music, works specifically for the radio, pieces that include chorus or vocal solos, and piano and chamber music”¹ as well as eight operas, did not always live his life by this motto. Throughout his career, Still’s music was often in conflict with his personal beliefs and, at times, even with itself. Although William Grant Still is most often labeled as a black composer portraying the African American narrative in his music for the concert hall, his attitudes regarding racial difference, musical style, and popular music demonstrate that he was a more complicated individual than that.

It’s no secret that William Grant Still incorporated African American elements into his large oeuvre. As Catherine Parsons Smith writes in her book *William Grant Still*, “Many [of Still’s works] are suggestive of African American life or of Still’s pan-African interests.”² With titles such as *Darker America*, *And They Lynched Him on a Tree*, and *Afro-American Symphony*, it is clear that much of Still’s music explored African American subjects. In fact, in his most

¹ Smith, Catherine Parsons. *William Grant Still*. American Composers. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008, 48.

² Ibid., 47.

popular work, *Afro-American Symphony*, Still used a blues as the principal theme of the first movement. Stated at the opening of the symphony by the English horn and followed by the muted trumpet, this blues was used as “the basic building block for all four movements.”³ In his sketchbook, he recognized that the blues was of “lowly origin” but he defended its use because of its capability to convey “the anguish of human hearts” and, more importantly, because it does not “exhibit the influence of caucasian music” as does the other traditional African American genre of the spiritual.⁴ It is clear from this justification that Still was actively incorporating thematic content that he viewed to be representative of African American culture into his works. His deliberate selection of the blues instead of the spiritual was a reflection of his desire to portray solely the African American narrative through his music, not the African American narrative as influenced by white America.

Another one of Still’s concert works, *Africa*, this one a three-movement suite for orchestra, was focused on portraying an idealized version of the continent that most African Americans had never seen for themselves. As evidenced in Still’s program notes for the piece, his basic concept for the work was to musically depict the Africa imagined by many African Americans, one based on “folklore” and “mirrored in fancy, and radiantly ideal.”⁵ The musical elements that represent African American culture are not nearly as obvious in this piece as in the *Afro-American Symphony*. There are some aspects in the first movement of the piece that are reminiscent of jazz, such as the “lyrical, improvisatory-sounding solo” played by the flute and the contrasting second theme, which makes use of syncopation.⁶ One could make the argument

³ Ibid., 48.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁶ Ibid.

that these syncopations and “improvisatory-sounding solo” are indebted to jazz, a truly African American genre, and thus are representative of African American culture as a whole. Whether this is true or not, it is clear from Still’s intention behind this suite that it is strongly connected to African American culture. As Smith writes, because this work is “an idealized vision that informed [Still’s] sensibilities and those of his fellow citizens - *Africa* becomes a powerful, positive statement of American black identity...”⁷ From this example, it is explicit that Still was adept at composing music with deep cultural ties to African Americans, whether or not he was incorporating traditional African American musical genres and elements in his pieces.

African American themes, both musical and otherwise, also abound in his operas. In fact, the themes present in his operas often reflected the experiences of being an African American and were especially representative of the rejection and discrimination that plagues performances of Still’s operatic works. According to Gene Cropsey in a review of Beverly Soll’s book entitled *I Dream a World: The Operas of William Grant Still*, of the eight operas that Still composed between 1934 and 1958, only four of them “have been staged with fully produced performances.”⁸ In addition to not having half of his operas performed, Still also experienced a large lapse of time between the completion of his operas and their performances, taking anywhere from one year (*Highway 1, USA*) to 34 years (*A Bayou Legend*) to be staged.⁹ The lack of support for productions of Still’s operas was indicative of the prejudice occurring at the time; this connection was also made by Still himself. In a diary entry dated January 1st, 1953, Still makes this connection abundantly clear when he writes, “[t]here are in these United States too

⁷ Ibid., 54.

⁸ Cropsey, Gene. "Beverly Soll: I Dream a World: The Operas of William Grant Still." *The Opera Quarterly* 22, no. 1, 2006, 173.

⁹ Ibid., 174-175.

many who think it only right for me to be denied the right to live. They connive to stop performances of my work...”¹⁰ Cropsey shares Still’s sentiments and believes that there was some racial bias behind the difficulties faced by Still in getting his operas performed: the time period Still composed his operas was “well before the civil rights movement gained its greatest momentum.”¹¹

However, there were more reasons behind Still’s suspicion that his works were being discriminated against than merely that victories won by the Civil Rights had not yet been achieved. In fact, Still experienced prejudice against his operas first hand at the premiere of *Troubled Island* in 1949. Although it was the first opera “by a black composer to be produced in the United States,”¹² it was not able to capture widespread support and attention from audiences and faded into the “purgatory reserved for operas that do not enter the regular repertoire” after its three scheduled performances.¹³ Still claims that the result for this negative reaction was due to the racial discrimination he experienced at the premiere. According to Still,

[e]ven after [*Troubled Island*] was scheduled for production, some people determined that it would not go through and there were several attempts to wreck it. When these failed and the production seemed well on its way, a white journalist from New York came to me several days before the opening and warned me that the critics were planning to pan it.¹⁴

It is clear from this statement that Still believed there was a premeditated, prejudice-motivated plan that reviewers were going to negatively critique the opera. This prejudice was unsurprising

¹⁰ Soll, Beverly. *I Dream a World: The Operas of William Grant Still*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2005, 26.

¹¹ Cropsey, Gene. "Beverly Soll: I Dream a World: The Operas of William Grant Still." *The Opera Quarterly* 22, no. 1, 2006, 173.

¹² Smith, Catherine Parsons. *William Grant Still*. American Composers. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008, 68.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁴ Soll, Beverly. *I Dream a World: The Operas of William Grant Still*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2005, 12.

to Still, who claimed that with the Metropolitan Opera's policy against accepting African American singers and the fact that "some white patrons won't even tolerate the presence of a Negro in an adjacent seat," it was no wonder that *Troubled Island* took ten years to premiere.¹⁵ Catherine Parsons Smith, though she does agree that some racial prejudice impacted the reception of the premiere, presents a less radical alternative to Still's claim. She asserts that the critic that Still maintains met with him, Howard Taubman of the *New York Times*, "wrote that he had not been able to meet Still at all."¹⁶ Instead, Smith believes that unfavorable reaction to *Troubled Island* was due to a "noxious combination of race prejudice...along with a continuing, more general prejudice against new 'American' operas..."¹⁷ Regardless of the validity of either Still's or Smith's claim, it is clear that William Grant Still believed that the reaction to the premiere of *Troubled Island* was influenced by the color of his skin and this experience was reflected in his music, including his operas.

Still's operas include many elements from both his personal experiences as a black American and from African American culture in general. The most obvious elements of African American culture can be found in the plots, settings, and messages of many of his operas. In *Troubled Island*, for example, not only does the plot consist of a "revolt against slavery and corruption from the French masters," but the overall message of creating "a world 'where black or white, whatever race you be, will share the bounties of the earth and every man is free'" is one that has a strong and obvious connection to the African American community.¹⁸ Another

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Smith, Catherine Parsons. *William Grant Still*. American Composers. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008, 76.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Soll, Beverly. *I Dream a World: The Operas of William Grant Still*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2005, 39.

one of Still's operas, *Minette Fontaine*, deals with "the tension brought about by the prejudices and class discrimination practiced by the Creole high society of New Orleans."¹⁹ It is clear from these examples that these operas focus on the struggle for equality, a struggle shared between African Americans in the real world. Additionally, Still's collaboration with famous Harlem renaissance poet Langston Hughes as the librettist of two of his operas, *Blue Steel* and *Troubled Island*, further solidifies his desire to portray the African American experience in his music. Other operas, such as *Blue Steel*, incorporate "primitive religious ceremonies," such as those performed by a witch doctor or for voodoo gods, which prominently feature drums.²⁰ These types of ceremonies, as well as the use of drums as the main instrument in these scenes, are commonly, albeit stereotypically, associated with ancient African culture, marking another connection between Still's operas and African American themes. When taken as a whole, the plots and themes found in Still's operas "explore, in a variety of contexts, the injustices and prejudices that the composer encountered throughout his life and share a vision of the world he dreamed might be possible."²¹ In other words, Still's operas are a manifestation of his own experiences as a black American and therefore include many elements that are directly representative of African American culture, with the goal to further the message of inclusion and acceptance.

As evidenced in the previous part of this paper, Still's African American heritage played a huge role in both his instrumental and operatic works, causing many to label him as a black composer writing black music for the concert hall. However, that is only part of the story. Although the previous part of this paper made clear that William Grant Still "made his African roots part of the universal expression in the field of classical music," his attitudes about racial

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 40.

²¹ Ibid., 37.

difference, musical style, and popular music demonstrate that he was a much more complex individual than merely a black composer writing black music.²²

Still's strong opposition against racial distinctions is the most prominent facet of his life that contradicts with the messages he conveys in his music. It has already been made clear that William Grant Still distinguished African American culture by championing its musical contributions in his works. However, Still's personal views regarding racial labels seem to contradict this desire to portray African American music in a distinct way from other cultures. According to Judith Anne Still, the composer's daughter, it seems as though Still did not appreciate the term "black," which is surprising, especially considering that nowadays this term is more appropriate than any terms used during Still's lifetime, such as "negro." Regardless of the associations with the term nowadays, according to Judith Anne Still, "[t]he epithets. 'Black,' 'Black music,' and 'Black culture,' were widely-used in the last decade of William Grant Still's public life, as indeed they continue to be today, and yet Still deplored them."²³ Still found this term to be deplorable because it was a label that implied more than just a difference in skin color between races. For him, it implied that races were naturally in opposition to one another, an implication he was thoroughly against.²⁴ However, though he clearly opposed it, a divide between races was created when Still emphasized African American culture in his music. One such example of a purposeful distinction between races is evidenced by Still's *Afro-American Symphony*, which even uses a racial label in its name. It seems that, during this earlier time in Still's career, not only was he unconcerned about using terms to distinguish between races, he

²² Ibid., x.

²³ Still, Judith Anne. *William Grant Still: A Voice High-sounding*. 1st ed. Flagstaff, Ariz.: Master-Player Library, 2003, 89.

²⁴ Ibid., 90.

was actually using those terms to make the connection to African American culture more obvious. With Still himself writing that the intention for this piece was “to elevate a musical idiom typical of the American Negro to symphonic level,”²⁵ he was clearly using racial labels to specifically champion African American culture, exemplifying that it could provide the content for serious, viable works. From this evidence, it is plain to see that William Grant Still’s personal beliefs later in his career contradicted his musical ones from earlier on.

Another area where Still’s views and actions are more complicated than are often appreciated is in the field of popular music. Early in his career, Still worked as an arranger and orchestrator for the conductor Don Voorhees, who preferred to work in Broadway and in radio, thus associating himself with popular music rather than music for the concert hall.²⁶ Therefore, Still, who found himself working with Voorhees for two and a half years, was arranging and orchestrating works of a more popular nature. Additionally, when Still arrived in New York around 1920, not only did he orchestrate several songs for the African American musical revue *Shuffle Along* and arrange for a handful of other musicals including *Rain or Shine*, *Earl Carroll’s Vanities of 1926*, and *Dixie to Broadway*, he also “performed with numerous Harlem jazz and popular music ensembles such as the Clef Club orchestras.”²⁷ In fact, Still became “as active and arguably as influential an arranger (though never as well paid) as Don Redman or Ferde Grofé, both now much better known as creative arrangers in the same years.”²⁸

²⁵ Oja, Carol J. “‘New Music’ and the ‘New Negro’: The Background of William Grant Still’s ‘Afro-American Symphony.’” *Black Music Research Journal* 22 (2002): 117.

²⁶ Smith, Catherine Parsons. *William Grant Still*. American Composers. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008, 38.

²⁷ Murchinson, Gayle. “‘Dean of Afro-American Composers’ or ‘Harlem Renaissance Man,’” in *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions*, ed. Catherine Parsons Smith, Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000, 42-43.

²⁸ Smith, Catherine Parsons. *William Grant Still*. American Composers. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008, 39.

When it comes to his personal opinions of popular music, Still seems to have held the genre in high regard. In an essay published in 1961, Still wrote the following:

I believe that composers who want to write serious music with an American flavor can learn much of value from the popular composers...popular music, as is well known, has never hesitated to make use of folk sources. Perhaps that is one reason for its strongly national characteristics as well as its broad appeal.²⁹

Not only is Still valuing popular music for its capability to create and maintain “broad appeal” from listeners, but he is encouraging its use in serious American music for the concert hall.

Clearly Still believes that popular music can bring both the value of folk melodies and popular appeal into other musical genres if composers would incorporate it into their serious music. This is extremely high praise for a genre of music that most composers of Still’s day looked upon as “‘merely’ instinctive, lacking emotional depth or (especially) an intellectual dimension” to such an extent that even George Gershwin was impacted by the biased view that “too close an identification with the ‘popular’ was likely to interfere with a concert composer’s career.”³⁰

Though it is clear that Still was active in the Harlem popular music scene and held popular music in high regard, he grew to distance himself from these experiences, choosing in his later years for the most part to ignore his achievements as an arranger, orchestrator, and performer of popular music to instead emphasize his career in the concert hall.³¹ Additionally, the mere fact that Still’s primary means of musical expression was his music for the concert hall implies that the genres of popular music and jazz were not sufficient for Still to express his

²⁹ Smith, William Grant and Arvey, Verna. “Our American Musical Resources,” in *The William Grant Still Reader: Essays on American Music*. Black Sacred Music; v. 6, No. 2. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992, 195-196.

³⁰ Smith, Catherine Parsons. *William Grant Still*. American Composers. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008, 39.

³¹ Ibid.

musical goals. Although he incorporated jazz and popular themes into much of his serious music, demonstrating that there was value to it, by not writing music *in* those genres for most of his career, he was not able to fully embrace the styles of music which had already been established as the “hallmark of black success in a notoriously oppressive culture.”³² Catherine Parsons Smith stresses the unintentional consequences of this when she writes that Still “*left* the ‘black’ world of popular music-making in order to compose symphonies, ballets, and operas just as these same genres were becoming so thoroughly entrenched as elite, white-only cultural markers” and how he “*left* the world of jazz at the moment when many of his erstwhile colleagues were turning their ghettoization to advantage.”³³ In other words, Smith makes explicit that since Still decided to write music primarily for the concert hall, he was not able to participate in jazz and popular music to the same extent as other African Americans. Instead, Still composed in a genre that was dominated by the elite white classes as opposed to the genres where African Americans were already experiencing great success and acclaim. Though Still incorporated elements of popular music into his concert works and advocated for their use in serious music, by not participating fully in the genres that were already commercially successful and well-representative of African American culture, he was demonstrating a preference for the white-dominated genre of classical music. While this preference for the concert hall isn’t in conflict with his earlier forays into the realm of popular music, it does demonstrate that William Grant Still was a complicated individual whose relationship with popular music was much more complex than simply rejecting or supporting it.

³² Ibid., 93-94.

³³ Ibid [italics in original].

Another aspect of Still's life demonstrates he was more complex than merely a black composer writing African American-inspired music. Though he began his career writing works that incorporated strictly African American themes, during the 1930s Still began writing in a universal idiom. This meant that, in addition to composing works that were based on African American themes, Still was now also writing works which "drew on other American and new World folk music sources, such as cowboy songs, Latin American and Caribbean traditions, music suggestive of Native Americans, and Hispanic missionary music from pre-statehood California."³⁴ This stylistic change stemmed from Still's changing personal beliefs. As he made clear in the essay "Our Musical Resources," discussed earlier in this paper,

As racial and national groups comprising our nation are drawn closer together, America becomes a stronger and better country. In the same way, a blending of their separate musical idioms should produce a music that is better, more varied, more appealing to more people, and that would even begin to approach the universal in scope.³⁵

It is clear from this statement that Still is advocating for a mixing of musical idioms from a variety of cultures because he believed it would create more diverse music which would also have wider appeal. He comes close to labeling his own universal style when he says that incorporating themes from a variety of cultures would create a music that would "approach the universal in scope."

³⁴ Smith, Catherine Parsons, and Forsythe, Harold Bruce. *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions*. Music of the African Diaspora ; 2. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000, 59.

³⁵ Smith, William Grant and Arvey, Verna. "Our American Musical Resources," in *The William Grant Still Reader: Essays on American Music*. Black Sacred Music; v. 6, No. 2. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992, 197.

This movement towards his universal idiom is evident in his piece *Rising Tide* (also known as *Victory Tide* or *Song of a City*), written as the theme song for the 1939 World's Fair in New York.³⁶ Still acknowledged that this piece was different from his typical African American inspired works in a 1938 letter to Alain Locke: "It seems to me that this must be the first time, musically speaking, that a colored man has ever been asked to write something extremely important that does not necessarily have to be Negroid..."³⁷ While this by no means implies that Still stopped writing music influenced by African American culture (especially when one realizes that he was working on *Troubled Island* during this same time),³⁸ it does demonstrate that his style was developing, incorporating a broader range of thematic material than his earlier, African-American saturated works. According to Judith Anne Still, this development stemmed from Still's "broadening awareness of the human family,"³⁹ an awareness evidenced in the quote from "Our Musical Resources," cited earlier in this paper. Catherine Parsons Smith claims that this shift was the result of Still's desire for his "musical utterance[s] to become one of many possible authentic American voices, and to write music that would communicate with all Americans."⁴⁰ Regardless of what motivated Still to begin writing music in this way, one thing remains clear: his universal idiom represents a change from solely elevating African American music into the concert hall. While this idiom is by no means a departure from his African

³⁶ Arvey, Verna. "William Grant Still" in *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions*, ed. Catherine Parsons Smith, Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000, 338.

³⁷ Smith, Catherine Parsons, and Forsythe, Harold Bruce. *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions*. Music of the African Diaspora ; 2. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000, 74.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Still, Judith Anne. *William Grant Still: A Voice High-sounding*. 1st ed. Flagstaff, Ariz.: Master-Player Library, 2003, 94.

⁴⁰ Smith, Catherine Parsons, and Forsythe, Harold Bruce. *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions*. Music of the African Diaspora ; 2. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000, 73.

American roots, nor is it in direct conflict with his earlier works, it demonstrates that Still was a much more complex individual who wrote music inspired by cultures other than his own.

It is clear from a multitude of his instrumental and operatic works, with *Afro-American Symphony*, *Africa*, and *Troubled Island* being just three of many examples, that Still extensively incorporated African American elements into his music. Because of this, combined with the fact that he was the first African American composer to have significant success in the concert hall, Still is often labeled as a black composer who wrote African American-oriented music. I believe that this is far too simplistic of a classification. As evidenced in this paper, Still was a complex artist, developing new styles and maintaining personal beliefs that did not totally agree with his music and opinions from earlier in his career. He did not support distinguishing between races and ethnicities using racial labels, but he “embraced and even exploited cultural difference in his art.”⁴¹ He participated in the field of popular music early in career and encouraged its widespread use in other musical genres, yet he chose to write in a genre that had traditionally frowned upon it and refrained from discussing his participation in it later in his career. He developed his universal idiom, which reflected his newfound desire to write music indicative of many different cultures, moving away from his earlier decision to write music that was almost entirely based on African American themes. These three facets of Still’s life clearly depict him as a complicated, somewhat contradictory individual who “explored his own doubleness as a creator of music” and had “multiple contradictions that surrounded him.”⁴² I would even go so far as to agree with Judith Anne Still, who views Still not only as a duality, but as a “plurality: a man aware of all the

⁴¹ Smith, Catherine Parsons. “‘Harlem Renaissance Man’ Revisited: The Politics of Race and Class in William Grant Still’s Late Career.” *American Music* 15, no. 3, 1997, 400.

⁴² Smith, Catherine Parsons, and Forsythe, Harold Bruce. *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions*. Music of the African Diaspora; 2. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000, 2.

aspects of this life and of the next, and a man capable of expressing these aspects musically.”⁴³ It is these more well-rounded views of Still that I encourage because, in examining him in this way, we not only get a better informed perspective of his life, but we are able to eliminate our harmful biases surrounding black artists, like those held by music critic Olin Downes, who “expected Still, as an African American composer, to write music indicative of his color.”⁴⁴ And it is essential to remove these prejudices from our lives, not only to improve upon society as a whole, but to do justice to all the black artists like William Grant Still, who have been unfairly labeled as simply promoters of their own culture when, in reality, they were much more than that.

⁴³ Still, Judith Anne. *William Grant Still: A Voice High-sounding*. 1st ed. Flagstaff, Ariz.: Master-Player Library, 2003, 238.

⁴⁴ Oja, Carol J. “‘New Music’ and the ‘New Negro’: The Background of William Grant Still’s ‘Afro-American Symphony’.” *Black Music Research Journal* 22 (2002): 114.

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