

Lenox Hill - The Music William Grant Still

Despite the enormous African-American influence on the history of American music, it was not until 1930 that a symphony by a Black American composer made itself known. It was the *Afro-American Symphony* by William Grant Still, who died in 1978 at the age of eighty-three but who remains to this day the foremost name among those Black Americans involved in classical music. No other African-Americans have approached the body of work which he left, that includes eight symphonies, seven operas, and more than one hundred concert and chamber pieces of various kinds.

Still grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, where his music teacher/mother introduced him to the violin. He began writing pieces for his instrument as a child and made his first serious inroad into classical music when he was a student at Wilberforce University. While there, he formed a string quartet and also began conducting. Still was fortunate in 1916 in coming to the attention of W.C. Handy, who assured the young composer that he could always turn to him for funds whenever he needed them. He orchestrated for Handy and other famous Black jazz musicians, which led to writing scores for theatrical productions and eventually a staff position as an arranger for CBS Radio. Despite his facile ability to handle popular music, Still's interests were always along more "Serious" lines. In the early Twenties, he studied with composer Charles Chadwick, then president of the New England Conservatory, and later with the esteemed Edgar Varese in New York. Neither man would accept payment from Still for their efforts.

In 1934 Still received a Guggenheim Fellowship. Shortly thereafter he moved to Los Angeles, which would be his home for the remainder of his life. He devoted himself to composition but supplemented his income by doing arrangements for film scores and musicals. Much of his work in Hollywood was for Columbia Pictures, where he not only wrote parts of scores but also penned some thirty musical sketches that were included in the Columbia stock music catalogue. Still was held in high regard in the Los Angeles music community and never lacked for work.

William Grant Still's musical life was possibly richer and more varied than any other American composer. He learned the value of his ethnic heritage as a child and later became involved in the intricacies of jazz and blues as well as show music. He also explored the frontiers of modern composition with Varese, an astringent musical intellectual, and thoroughly investigated the methods of Schoenberg before deciding that was not the course that he wanted to follow. Still opted to remain within the harmonic tradition, which he believed was far from exhausted. Fortunately, he was gifted with a great

talent for melody, a gift well evidenced by the variety of work contained on this compact disc.

Lenox Avenue is perhaps the most remarkable of Still's works since it brought together so many of the elements that characterized his output. With a text by Verna Avery, the composer's wife, the piece required dramatic and descriptive music, along with narration, choral passages, and dances. Originally commissioned by CBS Radio in 1937, it was transformed into a stage work the following year and given its premiere by the Dance Theatre of Los Angeles. Fusing drama with spiritual-like chants and jazz idioms, *Lenox Avenue* is pure Americana and one that had great influence. Set in Harlem in the mid-1930s, the score is marked into sections: The Crap Game, The Flirtation, The Fight, The Law, Dance of the Boys, Dance of the Man Down South, The Old Man (The Philosopher), The Mission, The House Rent Party, The Orator, and Finale. The performance on this disc is from 1938 with the CBS Symphony Orchestra conducted by Howard Barlow.

Among the most important associations in the career of William Grant Still was his long friendship with the renowned American violinist, Louis Kaufman. Always eager to premiere new American music, Kaufman asked Still to compose something especially for him. Still arranged for violin the melodic and peaceful "Summerland," the second movement of the piano suite, *Three Visions*. The success of the piece led Still to undertake a longer work, a suite for violin and piano. Since Kaufman and his wife, Annette, are noted art collectors, Still opted to key the suite to descriptions of works by African-American artists. The first was inspired by Richmond Barthe's "African Dancer," the second by Sargent Johnson's "Mother and Child," and the third by Augusta Savage's bronze "Gamin." The Suite had its debut with Kaufman in Boston in 1944 and was later orchestrated by the composer, with a cadenza following the second movement created by Kaufman at Still's suggestion. The *Suite for Violin and Orchestra* featured on this disc is from the broadcast of September 25, 1945 with Kaufman and the Standard Hour Symphony Orchestra conducted by Henry Svedrofsky.

The friendship of Still and Kaufman produced several other works, notable the *Pastorella* that resulted from Kaufman's remark that no one had written an American poem for violin. Still obliged him with a piece that strove to describe tonally the California landscape. Kaufman gave the work its premiere in New York in 1947. Kaufman subsequently performed and recorded two of Still's arrangements of source material: *Carmela*, a setting of an old California serenade of Spanish origin, and *Here's One*, based on the spiritual, "Talk about a Child that do Love Jesus, Here's One."

Still's string quartet, *Danzas de Panama*, is a highly unusual work. The four movements are based on Panamanian dances, which Still arranged in the manner that required the string players to approximate the sounds of native drumming by beating rhythmically on their instruments. Two of the pieces are included here.

The importance of William Grant Still to American music was stated quite emphatically by Leopold Stokowski some years before the composer's death: "In my opinion, William Grant Still is one of America's great citizens, because his musical nature has given him the power to fuse into one unified expression our American music of today with the ancestral memories lying deep within him of African music. This blending into one stream of diverse racial cultural origins is most important to the future of our country. For the reason that we Americans from so many racial origins, we must find a way to harmonize them into one – in our cultural and economic existence, and in our conception of what is the good life that we can share. Still has succeeded in this to a remarkable degree – and this is what gives deep significance to his life and musical creation."

— Tony Thomas

A note about this release.

I first released most of this album back in 1991. The broadcast of *Lenox Avenue* was taken from acetates and at that time we did as much as we could to clean them up, which, unhappily, wasn't really much. However, here it is, 2018, and we're blessed with Chris Malone, who is, in my mind, the greatest audio restoration person working today. I cannot tell you how many "lost" projects he's saved from oblivion. He has done wonders with both versions of *Lenox Avenue*, which now sound as good as they're ever going to, which is pretty damn good, if you ask me.

The smaller pieces came from Louis Kaufman and were decently recorded. For this release we decided to also include a separate version of *Lenox Avenue*, this one with just the music and no narration. While the narration, especially as spoken by the wonderful actor, Juano Hernandez, is part and parcel of Still's conception, it's fun to hear the piece without it.

That version is conducted by Still himself with the Los Angeles WPA Symphony Orchestra. William Grant Still was an American original and a truly important figure in American music. We hope you enjoy this wonderful music.

— Bruce Kimmel