

## IV. THE COMPOSERS AND THE AFRICAN SPIRIT

Almost since the first consciousness of the uniqueness of the African musical expression as it related to European musical forms there has been a conscious use of this musical idiom for classical composition by both European and African composers. The earliest style which has been discovered is the *canary*, or *canario*, which was created by slaves in the Canary Islands before 1550. The early canary was notated by a number of composers, and became a popular European dance style included as a unique piece in stage presentations. Among the European composers who created their own versions of the canary were Purcell, Telemann, Lully and Couperin, and for 150 years the dance and its music were popular everywhere in Europe.

### A. A WILLIAM GRANT STILL ARCHIVE

William Grant Still, who was born in Woodville, Mississippi in 1895 and died in Los Angeles in 1978, is widely regarded as the foremost African American composer to pioneer a new concert music which utilized melodic themes and rhythms of African American vernacular musical traditions. His *Afro American Symphony* from 1931 was the first symphony by an African American composer to be presented by a major American orchestra, and his music has continued to have a place in the modern symphonic repertoire. He had a long and varied career, from early ragtime songs written under pseudonyms, involvement with the ground-breaking African American musical *Shuffle Along* in 1920, and years as a successful arranger for 1930s swing orchestras and an extended period as a staff arranger for major radio networks. This collection, intended as an introduction to the breadth of his musical achievement, includes both recordings and music scores. The source of much of the material was his daughter, Judith Anne Still, and this has been supplemented with recordings that were commercially available.

Although it has never been possible to disassociate Still's race from discussions of his music, he wrote himself that he didn't feel this had necessarily been an obstacle to his career. In an article titled "Are Negro Composers Handicapped," published in 1937, he insisted that the only handicap he faced was the test of talent.

"Frankly I do not believe that any honors which have failed to come to me have done so because I am a colored man. Nor do I believe that leading symphony orchestras the world over play my music because I am a Negro. If one can believe the letters that have come from conductors and listeners, and notices from critics, my music is played because it is liked; because it says something to those who hear it. There would be no point in playing it simply because I am colored. The day has passed when a colored man can do things that are "pretty good for a colored man" and be praised for them. . . If a Negro composer writes a good piece of music and it is the will of God that this be given to the world, it will be performed. If not, his work will soon pass into oblivion. Isn't this true of a white composer as well?" (from *The Baton* 1, no. 2. Nov. 1937)

## BOOKS

*The William Grant Still Reader: Essays on American Music.* Jon Michael Spencer, editor. Chapel Hill, Duke University Press, 1992. (Dodd B6617) This was published as a Special issue of *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology*.

Still was a charming, serious commentator on his own and other composer's music. Of interest is his strongly negative reaction to the 1930s social activists, whom he characterised as "Leftists," and what he felt was their support of "Ultra Modern" composition for political purposes.

Arvey, Verna, *In One Lifetime.* Fayetteville, The University of Arkansas Press, 1984 (Dodd C6278)

Verna Arvey was Still's wife, herself an accomplished pianist who provided libretti to several of his vocal works. Her book is both a warm personal memoir and a discussion of the racial and social issues which played a role in her husband's career.

## MUSIC

Most of these publications have been issued by Judith Anne Still under the imprint of William Grant Still Music.

*Africa* - A Suite for Solo Piano *Folder 246*

*Seven Traceries* - A Suite for Solo Piano *Folder 247*

*Songs of Separation* - A Song Cycle - Voice and Piano *Folder 248*

This is a cycle of five songs, four of them utilizing poems of major African American poets as texts.

Included are: Idolatry - Arna Bontemps

Poeme - Philippe Thoby Marcelin

Parted - Paul Laurence Dunbar

If You Should Go - Countee Cullen

A Black Pierrot - Langston Hughes

This score is also included in a reprint of the original publication by Leeds Music Corporation in 1949.

*Three Visions* - A Suite for Solo Piano *Folder 249*

## RECORDINGS

Virtually all of Still's major works are included on either LP or CD format. Of special interest are the recordings of three of his symphonies, including *The Sunday Symphony*, which was first performed in 1984, six years after his death. The LP performance was the world premier.

## LPs

*Symphony # 3 The Sunday Symphony* The North Arkansas Symphony Orchestra  
Also included on the disc are *Romance for Saxophone and Piano*, *Folk Suite #4*, and  
*Three Rhythmic Spirituals* Dodd LP 988

## *Art Songs by Black American Composers*

This is an invaluable double CD set of art songs which includes Still's "Grief," for soprano, with piano accompaniment. *Dodd LPs 989a & 989b*

## CDs

*Afro American Symphony (Symphony # 1)* Cincinnati Philharmonia Orchestra  
Also included on the disc are his compositions *Kaintuck'* and *Dismal Swamp*. *Dodd CD 1699*

*Symphony No. 2 (Song of a New Race)* Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Neeme Jarvi, conductor

Also included on the disc are William Levi Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony* and Duke Ellington's *Harlem* *Dodd CD 1700*

*From the Delta* Northern Arizona University Wind Symphony

The disc includes Still's *From the Delta*, *Folk Suite*, and *Little Red Schoolhouse*  
*Dodd CD 1701*

*Music of African American Composers - William Grant Still 100th Anniversary Celebration* Northern Arizona University Wind Symphony

The disc includes Still's *Summerland*, *The American Scene*, and *Levee Land*, as well as music by Florence Price and Roger Dickerson. *Dodd CD 1702*

## CASSETTES

*Piano Music* Albert Dominguez

Selections include *Bells*, *Three Visions*, *Lenox Avenue*, *Seven Traceries*, and *Quit Dat Fool'nish* *Dodd AC 843*

*Strings, Keyboard and Harp* Louis Kaufman, Lois Adele Craft, Annette Kaufman, and The Kaufman String Quartet

Selections include *Enmanga*, *Danzas de Panama*, *The Suite for Violin and Piano*, *Pastorela*, *Here is One*, *Blues*, and *Summerland* *Dodd AC 844*

Neither of the cassettes includes the notes on the music presented with the LP release, but Ms. Still has included copies of the LP jackets with the notes.

## **RELATED MATERIALS**

Included with the material obtained from Judith Anne Still are reprints of reviews, tributes, sales flyers, and presidential commendations. There are also three catalogs:

William Grant Still Sheet Music Catalog

Minority Composers Sheet Music Catalog

Catalog of Recordings, Books, & Educational Materials