# Montgomery Philharmonic 2016 - 17
# Our 11th Season – Inspired by…

## Concert 5, Sunday, May 21, 2017 – Inspired by America

Larsen | Poelking | Copland | Still

**About William Grant Still –**
William Grant Still was undoubtedly one of the most influential African-American composers of the early 20th century. He started his musical career playing oboe in the pit orchestra of an All-Black musical, *Shuffle Along*, in 1921. His composition career started when he was awarded a scholarship to study at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in the era of Jim Crow segregation, when Oberlin was one of the few major conservatories that admitted black students. The premiere of Still's *Afro-American Symphony* in 1931 signaled one of the earliest works by an African-American composer to gain a place in the orchestral canon, and it has held up well over time. In the work's title, Still identified his race with pride, inspired by the cultural activism of the Harlem Renaissance. Prior to studying music at Oberlin, Still studied medicine at Wilberforce University and served in the Navy during World War I. Later, he moved to New York and studied composition with George Chadwick and Edgard Varèse. He then traveled to Los Angeles, where he spent his final years and died on December 3, 1978.

- **Born:** May 11, 1895, Woodville, Mississippi
- **Died:** December 3, 1978, Los Angeles, California
- **Compositions:** 30 works for solo piano, 6 works for organ, 33 instrumental works, 8 song cycles, 11 operas, 4 ballets, 3 sets of incidental music to a play, 47 orchestral works, 5 symphonies, 27 works for orchestra and chorus or orchestra and soloists, 17 works for band, 5 works for brass ensemble, 16 works for string quartet
- **Parents:** Carrie Lena Fambro Still (1872–1927) and William Grant Still Sr. (1871–1895) – passed away when William was 3 months old; Charles B. Shepperson – stepfather

***Afro-American Symphony* (1930) – William Grant Still (1895–1978)**
William Grant Still's *Symphony No. 1 – Afro-American Symphony* met with great controversy among the press when it was first played by a major symphony. Some felt that the piece belonged with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra, a jazz group that Still often played with, and others who felt that the melding of classical elements with African-American Culture was brilliant. Still wanted to "portray not the higher type of colored American, but the sons of the soil, who still retain so many of the traits peculiar to their African forebears and who have not responded completely to the transforming effect of progress."

The symphony has four movements, each of which has two different sets of titles, signaling the cultural bifurcation that defined Still's career. One version is thoroughly European: "Moderato assai," "Adagio," "Animato," and "Lento, con risoluzione," while the other, as found in one of Still's notebooks, refers to African-American history: "Longing," "Sorrow," "Humor," and "Aspiration." In the end, because Still wanted to be taken seriously as a symphony composer, he published the work with the traditional European movement titles.

Still was studying with Edgard Varèse when he wrote this first symphony. He kept detailed notebooks with hundreds of themes, each labeled with the theme's effect. He used terms such as voodoo, lament, and spiritual. Reading these notebooks, one gets a sense that he was assimilating two cultures to come up with a symphony that made a larger than life statement.

Each movement has a separate character and the original titles—"Longing," "Sorrow," "Humor," and "Aspiration"—tell the story. The first movement opens with a haunting English horn blues solo that is then echoed in several other instruments throughout the movement. The second movement has an F major tonal center with many chromatic alternations that maintain the blues feeling. The movement works to avoid Western European music's drive to a cadence; the absence of cadences leaves the listener with a sense of ambiguity. The third movement uses essentially two minstrel themes, with small variations that depict a joyous, hallelujah feeling. The use of the tenor banjo adds to the magic and down home feel of the movement. It is the only movement that uses the traditional Western European drive toward cadence, so this accounts for the completeness that the listener enjoys. The final movement is full of hope. Its themes, tempo variations, and harmonies give the listener a sense of desire, expectation, and dreams.

Still selected four epigraphs in the context of longer quotations from Paul Laurence Dunbar's poems. The poems used as epigraphs for the first two movements refer to the dreams and sorrows of the former slaves. The opening stanza of "Twell de Night Is Pas'," prefacing the opening movement with its blues theme, reads:
All de night long twell de moon goes down,
Lovin' I set at huh feet,
Den fu' de long jou'ney back f'om de town,
Ha'd, but de dreams mek it sweet.
Still quotes the close:
"All my life long twell de night has pas'
Let de wo'k come ez it will,
So dat I fin' you, my honey, at last,
Somewhaih des ovah de hill."

The first stanza of "W'en I Gits Home" is attached to the slow second movement, with its spiritual-like melody:
It's moughty tiahsome layin' 'roun'
Dis sorrer-laden erfly groun',
An' oftentimes I thinks, thinks I,
'T would be a sweet t'ing des to die,
An go 'long home.

The upbeat third movement poem shows how effectively Still used the "minstrel mask" to reflect his sense of racial doubleness:
We is gathahed hyeah, my brothahs,
In dis howlin' wildaness,
Fu' to speak some words of comfo't
To each othah in distress.

So you see de Lawd's intention,
Evah sence de worl' began,
Was dat His almighty freedom
Should belong to evah man,

But when Moses wif his powah
Comes an' sets us chillun free,
We will praise de gracious Mastah
Dat has gin us liberty;
An' we'll shout ouah halleluyahs,
On dat mighty reck'nin' day,
When we'se reco'nised ez citiz'—
Hun un! Chillun, let us pray!
The final movement, with its hymn-like, modal opening, hardly changed from the initial one-page outline in figure 5 and its lively finale, was first assigned the final stanza from Dunbar's "Ode to Ethiopia":
Go on and up! Our souls and eyes
Shall follow thy continuous rise;
Our ears shall list thy story
From bards who from thy root shall spring,
And proudly tune their lyres to sing
Of Ethiopia's Glory.

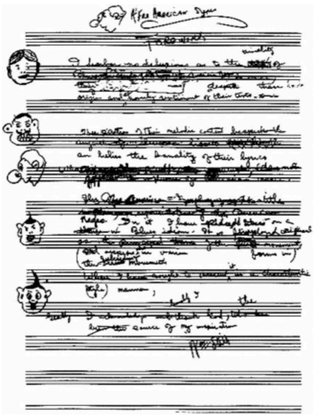
All printed editions of the score bear this rather better-known stanza from the same poem:
Be proud, my Race, in mind and soul,
Thy name is writ on Glory's scroll
In characters of fire.
High 'mid the clouds of Fame's bright sky,
Thy banner's blazoned folds now fly,
And truth shall lift them higher.

**Instrumentation –** Four flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, vibraphone, triangle, wire brush, snare drum, cymbals, tenor banjo, harp, celeste, strings

**Artifacts –**
– Program of concert given by the New York Philharmonic, November 20, 1935 featuring William Grant Still's Afro-American Symphony

– Program given by the New York Philharmonic – Music of America, February 25, 1976

A page from Still's sketchbook:



Available on iTunes

1. William Grant Still: Afro-American Symphony & Amy Beach: Gaelic Symphony, Op. 32 - Karl Krueger & Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

amazon.com

1. In One Lifetime: A Biography of William Grant Still
2. William Grant Still (American Composers)
3. American Series, Vol. 3 - Still: Symphony No. 1 / Ellington: The River Suite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