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***Composition in Africa
and the Diaspora
Volume 3***

***Akin Euba & Cynthia Tse Kimberlin
Editors***

African Music in Latin America

African and African American Music in China

The Music of William Grant Still

***The Music of Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria
in New Environments***



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The subject of composition may seem to some to be an apt one to discuss in relation to Africa and there are, in some people who doubt that there is such a thing as African composition. Others are fully convinced that there is and this book is proof that it was not just a passing fancy for some writers and composers. The theme of "Composition in Africa and the Diaspora" was discussed biennially at Chesham College, Chesham, Bucks, UK. The third in our series of books, *AFRICA*, is a collection of the papers generated by the third symposium and held in 2015. The series of symposia and books is an important forum for the discussion of African composition and the various strategies are crucial in the development of a new music on the African continent, they are by no means the only strategies and

Intercultural Music and William Grant Still

by

Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje

In the "Introduction" to the first volume of a collection of essays entitled *Intercultural Music*, Cynthia Kimberlin and Akin Euba provide several examples of composers making use of interculturalism: (a) when composers, regardless of their ethnic or cultural origin, integrate elements from two or more cultures, (b) when composers write in an idiom acquired from a culture other than their own, (c) when both composer and all elements featured in the work are derived from the same culture, and (d) when music and the performer originate from different cultures (Kimberlin and Euba 1995:2-3). Interculturalism embodies William Grant Still as an individual and a composer. When Still moved to Los Angeles, he began integrating the music of different cultural traditions into his music. To demonstrate why he became more deeply involved in intercultural music, I focus on several aspects of Still and his music: (1) his life before his arrival in Los Angeles, (2) his musical life in Los Angeles, and (2) his musical creativity in Los Angeles. I will demonstrate that cultural diversity was a driving force that accounts for the reasons he chose Los Angeles as a place of residence for the most productive years of his life.

Still's Life Before His Arrival in Los Angeles

Still was born May 11, 1895, in Woodville, Mississippi, the only child of William Grant Still, Sr. and Carrie Lena Fambro. Both parents were schoolteachers with college degrees. When Still's father died at the age of 24, the younger Still was only a few months old. Distraught and heart broken after the death, Still's mother left Woodville and settled in Little Rock, Arkansas, where she lived with her mother. When Still was a youngster, his mother re-married Charles B. Shepperson, a

mother was of African, Spanish, Indian and Irish ancestry, while his biological father was of African, Indian and Scotch ancestry (Arvey 1995:17). In writing about his life, Still often emphasized that his upbringing did not fit the stereotype associated with most southern blacks. He writes:

It may be hard for many people to believe that my boyhood was a typically American one, far removed from the ordinary concept of a little colored boy growing up in the South. I knew neither wealth nor poverty, for I lived in a comfortable middle-class home, with luxuries such as books, musical instruments and phonograph records in quantities found in few other homes of this sort. . . . It is true that there was segregation in Little Rock during my boyhood, but my family lived in a mixed neighborhood and our friends were both white and colored. So were my playmates. . . . So, while I was aware of the fact that I was a Negro, and once in a while was reminded of it unpleasantly, I was generally conscious of it in a positive way, with a feeling of pride. At the same time, my association with people of both racial groups gave me the ability to conduct myself as a person among people instead of as an inferior among superiors. (W. G. Still 1995:11-12)

After graduating as valedictorian from his high school in Little Rock, Still attended Wilberforce University (1911-1915). To please his mother, he studied medicine but did not graduate. During much of his time at Wilberforce, he was involved with music. When he organized a string quartet in college, he played the violin, the instrument he had studied as a youngster in Little Rock, and began to experiment with arranging. He also learned to play the oboe and clarinet and became a member of the college band, which led to explorations in orchestration. Upon leaving Wilberforce, Still married Grace Bundy, his college sweetheart, and began working as a professional musician first in Columbus, Ohio, and later with W. C. Handy in Memphis. For Still these were years filled with an assortment of experiences that included an unsatisfactory marriage, playing the oboe and cello with various orchestras, starving, freezing, working at odd jobs for little money, and a hitch in the U.S. Navy in 1918. Returning home from the Navy, he renewed his

association with Handy who had by this time moved his firm to New York City.

During the 1920s, Still was so much in demand as an orchestrator and arranger in New York, he could have continued to do this as his life's career. In addition to working for popular and jazz artists such as Earl Carroll, Artie Shaw, Sophie Tucker, Don Voorhees, and Paul Whiteman, Still arranged and conducted orchestras for radio programs on CBS, Mutual, and NBC networks (Slattery 1995:7; Arvey 1995:17). In spite of the fame and notoriety in the New York music world, he was not satisfied or happy with his achievements, which probably led him to seek changes. Still explains:

The middle twenties had to arrive before I had committed myself to Negro music. . . . This followed periods of conservatory study at Oberlin; learning in the school of experience (i.e., I was self-taught in orchestration); and private study on scholarships, with George W. Chadwick who acquainted me with serious American music, and with Edgar Varèse, who introduced me to the ultramodern idiom. All the while, I had been making it a point to listen to Negro music everywhere I went. On Beale Street in Memphis, where I worked with W. C. Handy, as an onlooker in small Negro churches, and in popular bands.

Although my compositions in Mr. Varèse's dissonant idiom brought me to the attention of metropolitan critics, I soon decided that this was not representative of my own musical individuality, and adopted a racial form of expression. Quite a few of my compositions with racial titles were the result of this decision. I made an effort to elevate the folk idiom into symphonic form, though rarely making use of actual folk themes. For the most part, I was developing my own themes in the style of the folk.

Following this period, there came a time when I leaned toward a more universal idiom which, in my opinion, partook of all the others and became an expression of my own individuality as a composer. In other words, instead of limiting myself to one particular style, I wrote as I chose, using whatever idiom seemed appropriate to the subject at hand. (W. G. Still 1995:15-16)

The seeds of transformation that Still sought took root when he spent one year (1929 to 1930) in Los Angeles, working with jazz bandleader Paul Whiteman (1890-1967) as the arranger for his weekly radio show, the Old Gold Hour. While in Los Angeles, Still revived his friendship with Harold Bruce Forsythe, whom he met in New York several years earlier. It was also on the West Coast that he was stimulated to complete the major works of his racial period: his ballet *Sahdji* (1929-30) and the trilogy of his symphonic works, portraying first the African roots, then the voices of African Americans, and finally the integrated, equal society for which he hoped.¹ Through Forsythe, Still also met Verna Arvey (the woman who would become his second wife) during his first sojourn to Los Angeles.

When Still returned to New York, his career blossomed to even greater heights. Three works premiered over fifteen months in 1930 and 1931: *Africa*, *Sahdji*, and *Afro-American Symphony* with great success. Still attributes his good fortune to the one-year stay in Los Angeles, which he believed was a turning point in his life and career. In Los Angeles, Still discovered that being away from the tumult of New York and the turmoil of a failing marriage, he found the time and the serenity to think about his future as a composer. His early visit to Los Angeles affected him so profoundly that he knew that he wanted return after his contract with Whiteman ended. In his successful Guggenheim application of 1934, Still stated that he wanted to return to California because it produced an atmosphere conducive for him to create (Smith 2000:73-74). Therefore in 1934, Still permanently settled in Los Angeles, where he remained until his death in 1978. In 1939, he divorced his first wife and married Verna Arvey (Arvey 1984:110).

Still's Musical Life in Los Angeles

When Still permanently settled in Los Angeles in 1934, he interacted with a diverse group of people: the black community,

the music industry, and the white community. There is no evidence that Still was personally involved in black Los Angeles' nightlife or commercial music scene. While he did not actively participate, Catherine Parsons Smith suggests that Still was deeply affected by what was taking place on Central Avenue, an area of black Los Angeles that was vibrant in the 1930s and 1940s with black businesses, nightclubs, and other activities (Cox 1993).² In fact, she argues that Still's *Lenox Avenue* (1937) actually began as an ode to Los Angeles' Central Avenue. Smith writes:

One of Still's projects after completing *Blue Steel* [1934, his first opera] was a musical portrayal of Central Avenue, the center of African American life in Los Angeles, probably intended for a film production. Something of a mystery surrounds this score. Forsythe agreed to provide a scenario in 1935; the original idea was very like his. Still offered it to Howard Hanson for a ballet production at Eastman and then withdrew it. Not long after this, Still became one of six composers commissioned by the CBS radio network to compose a work specifically designed for radio orchestra. *Central Avenue* was quickly revised into a suite specifically for broadcast, becoming New York's *Lenox Avenue* and scoring one of a series of national successes that came to Still in the first fifteen years of his Los Angeles residence. Later, *Lenox Avenue* became a ballet, with a new scenario by Arvey. (Smith 2000:81-82)

Although Still was not a member of a black church, he was active with Los Angeles church musicians. In 1952, the Los Angeles premier of Still's *And They Lynched Him on a Tree* (1940), an orchestral work with soloists and chorus, took place at People's Independent Church of Christ by two of Los Angeles' major choirs: the Cathedral Choir of People's Independent (a predominantly black church) and the Senior Choir of First Baptist Church of Los Angeles (a predominantly white congregation) (McNeil 1996:19-21).

Still interacted with many of Los Angeles black professional musicians noted for the performance of art music. Jester

Hairston, Dorothy Maynor, Georgia Laster, Philippa Schuyler, and Florence Cole-Talbert are just some of the performers and music educators with whom Still collaborated (Arvey 1984:108). On one occasion, Still gave a lecture on "Writing Music for Films" at the Twelfth Street YWCA, while John Gray, the director-founder of the John Gray Conservatory, accompanied a soprano soloist (Smith 2000:76-77). Groups associated with the Works Progress Administration often used Still's music in their recitals and the Southeast Symphony, an orchestra based in the black community of Inglewood, California, performed Still's ballet *Sahdji*, at the Masonic Temple on Wilshire Boulevard (Brantley in Cox 1993:133). In addition, the Angel City Symphony Orchestra featured one of Still's works at the Music Center (Leroy Hurte in Cox 1993:229).

During the 1940s, Still and Arvey were frequent guests of Sam Browne, the first African American music teacher at Jefferson High School, a well known school in the city where several noted black professionals received their training: choreographer Alvin Ailey, diplomat and Nobel Peace Prize winner Ralph Bunche, actress Dorothy Dandridge, and jazz musicians Dexter Gordon, Frank Morgan, Art Farmer, and Horace Tapscott (Cox 1993:107). When W. C. Handy visited Still in Los Angeles, Still took him to Jefferson to speak to students (Arvey 1984:125).

The Los Angeles music industry was the magnet that attracted musicians from all walks of life to the West Coast. Work in Hollywood was especially lucrative because it offered opportunities to work in film, radio, and television. Although Still worked on some projects at studios in Hollywood (e.g., Columbia Pictures, Warner Bros. and Twentieth Century Fox), the two entities (Hollywood and Still) never seemed to mesh. Yet in the early 1950s, Still produced a "Laredo Suite" from which excerpts were used as fillers in television series such as "Gunsmoke" and "Perry Mason" (Smith 2000:80-81).

Through his wife, Verna Arvey (a Los Angeles native of Jewish ancestry), Still had extensive interactions with the white community. Not only did Arvey (a pianist) often perform Still's music at different events, but she also used her position as a journalist (writing in newspapers and magazines) to promote Still. In 1935, Still participated in a symposium on new music organized by Arvey at the Normal Gould Studio. When Still conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic orchestra (an all-white, all male group) on July 23, 1936, at the Hollywood Bowl, he was the first black person in the United States to conduct a major symphony orchestra. Between 1939 and 1955, Los Angelenos heard Still's concert music on radio, thanks to the Standard School Broadcasts (sponsored by Standard Oil of California) that originated in Los Angeles. More than 30 performances of Still's music (20 different works) were broadcast. Los Angeles-based publishers published Still's music. For example, Henry Cowell's *New Music Edition* published his tone poem, *Dismal Swamp* (1936), one of his earliest works to be composed in Los Angeles. Throughout his time in the city, there were numerous presentations at both public and private middle schools, high schools, colleges, and universities (Smith 2000:78-79).

Still's Musical Creativity in Los Angeles

Before his arrival in Los Angeles, Still dreamt of becoming an opera composer, for he loved the stage and the sound of operatic singing. Arvey explains:

His work in the symphonic field was in part a substitute because he had been unable to make any headway in opera. He had written many operas and torn most of them up; he had tried to make contact with major producers such as the Metropolitan Opera Company, and failed. He had applied for a Guggenheim Fellowship so that he could have a year free in which to work on an opera, but he had been refused. Dr. [Howard] Hanson [a friend and mentor], was visibly surprised to learn of the refusal, and

suggested that he try again the following year. He did, and this time he was awarded one. (Arvey 1984:83)

In his 1934 Guggenheim application, Still stated that he wanted to compose opera and he felt that Los Angeles provided the ideal setting to accomplish this goal. On May 22, 1934, he walked away from fame and a lucrative career, and drove to Los Angeles and settled down to compose his new opera (Arvey 1984:83). During his time in Los Angeles (almost 45 years) Still composed eight operas: *Blue Steel* (1934); *Troubled Island* (1938); *A Bayou Legend* (1941); *A Southern Interlude* (1942), an early version of *Highway 1 USA*; *Costaso* (1949); *Mota* (1951); *The Pillar* (1955); and *Highway 1, USA* (1962). In addition, Still composed several other works for stage: the two ballets *Lenox Avenue* (1937) and *Miss Sally's Party* (1940); music for a children's play by Carol Stone, *Incidental Music from the Prince and the Mermaid* (1965); and the short piece "I'm Picking My Last Row of Cotton" (1941) that was later discarded (J. A. Still 1995).

Still was prolific and he composed in a wide variety of media: for stage, for orchestra, for orchestra with soloists or chorus, for band, string quartet, chamber music, for solo instruments and piano, for piano, organ, accordion, voice or voices and piano. In spite of the volume and the diverse media in which he created, he continues to be best known for the *Afro-American Symphony* (1930), the masterpiece that he began working on in Los Angeles but completed while living in New York. Although Still composed in a neo-romantic style, his music resists neat classification because some of his music reflects the avant-garde influence. Since the desire to compose opera was the primary reason for Still deciding to settle in Los Angeles, it might be useful to focus on these works to examine how they reflect the changes in Still's creativity and more significant involvement in interculturalism.

As noted in the foregoing, Still divides his musical career into three periods: commercial, racial, and universal. By the time he reached Los Angeles, his music was still heavily racial, which can be seen in his first four operas. Each, to some degree, deals with the black experience in either the United States or the Americas. *Blue Steel* was based on the story of a mysterious voodoo (i.e. Vodun) religious group at odds with a strong-minded arrogant man from the outer world. *Troubled Island*, the first of his operas to be performed in its entirety, is based on a libretto by Langston Hughes about the life of Haiti's first Emperor, Jean Jacques Dessalines. *A Bayou Legend*, the first opera on which Still and Arvey collaborated fully (she wrote the libretto), is based on the black folkways in the Bayou country of Mississippi in the nineteenth century. When it appeared on public television in 1981, it became the first opera written by a black composer to be telecast on a national network.

As the city of Los Angeles became more culturally diverse between the 1940s and 1960s (the white population shifted from constituting 93 percent of city's total population in 1940 to 83 percent in 1960),³ Still responded by using a variety of culturally diverse themes in his operas. In the subsequent operas with Arvey as his librettist, he employed subjects or topics not solely defined as black: *Costaso* (Spanish colonial period in the American West), *Mota* (Central Africa), *The Pillar* (American Indians), and *Minette Fontaine* (Vodun in Louisiana). *Highway 1 USA*, Still's last opera, is the story of two brothers and their conflict. The setting is a gas station on Highway 1 in the eastern United States, where it portrays a family whose culture is generally "American" but not racially specific.

Conclusion

Since Los Angeles appears to have played a major role in Still's career and his move toward interculturalism, this raises several questions: what were the motivating factors that caused him to

settle in Los Angeles and what did Los Angeles offer him that was not available elsewhere?

I believe both personal and professional reasons affected Still's decision to settle in Los Angeles. On the personal side, moving to Los Angeles signaled the end of one relationship (the troubled marriage with his college sweetheart, Grace Bundy) and the blossoming of a new one (his growing attraction, collaborations, and partnership with Verna Arvey).

On the professional side, Still regarded Los Angeles as a stimulant for creativity because of the successes that transpired during his first stay between 1929 and 1930. Thus, it was an environment and setting that motivated him to create. As Still gradually became interested in universal music (or what we here call intercultural music), he desired a setting with the greatest potential to reflect this ideal. Changes in Los Angeles' ethnic makeup affected Still professionally and musically. As one of the most culturally diverse cities in the United States, if not the world, Los Angeles became a laboratory for interculturalism. He could use different cultures in the Americas that were a part of his racially mixed background and his life in the Southwest as settings for operas. What was occurring in Los Angeles was a mirror of the changes taking place in the United States. As a true American, Still wanted to reflect these transformations in his music.

Notes

1. The trilogy consists of three orchestral works: *Africa* (composed in 1928 and premiered in 1930), *Afro-American Symphony* (composed in 1930 and premiered in 1931), and *Symphony in G Minor: Song of a New Race* (1937).
2. See Eastman (1998) and Rice (2005) for a discussion of Central Avenue and Los Angeles nightlife.

3. For a discussion of changes in Los Angeles' ethnic and sociocultural environment during the twentieth century, see Waldinger and Bozorgmehr (1996) and DjeDje and Meadows (1998).

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