

William Grant Still

Many composers encounter obstacles in their pursuit of a career in music. For some, it's a parent demanding a different professional goal; for others, finances are the major stumbling block. But for William Grant Still the major impediment to a successful career in classical music was the color of his skin.

William Grant Still was born in 1895 in Woodville, Mississippi to teacher/musician parents of African-American, Native-American, Spanish, Irish and Scotch heritage. But, to many, Still was simply a black man.

Things were difficult from the start. When Still was just three months old, his father William Grant Still, Sr. died. He had been the town bandmaster in Woodville and also taught at the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Alabama. Shortly afterward, Still's mother, Carrie Lena Still moved the rest of the family to Little Rock, Arkansas where she took a teaching position. Several years later, she met and married Charles Shepperson, a railway postal clerk.

Musical inspiration came early for Still. Around 1904, his stepfather purchased a Victrola and accumulated a sizable collection of operas on cylinder. Still would sit and listen for hours and soon fell in love with the music. Still also got inspiration from his maternal grandmother, a former slave, who lived with the Sheppersons in Little Rock. She taught him songs sung on the plantation and also instilled in him the value of faith in God, something that would become central to Still's life pursuits.

The family lived comfortably enough that Still was able to take violin lessons. When he graduated high school in 1911, Still told his mother he intended to devote his life to music. Suspecting it would be nearly impossible for a black man to achieve success in the field of music, Still's mother insisted he enroll at Wilberforce College in Ohio and study medicine instead.

Still complied, but spent a good deal of his time at Wilberforce pursuing music. He was a member of the college band, wrote music for the band and even organized a string quartet. But all this music didn't sate his musical appetite; it only whetted it. Before long Still concluded he was just wasting time and money at Wilberforce so, before completing his degree, Still quit college to pursue music.

Though his first love was classical and specifically opera, Still began with a career in popular music. He worked with several groups including that of "Father of the Blues" W.C. Handy beginning in 1916. Still toured with Handy and played all over including the 1921 New York run of the popular all black show *Shuffle Along*. Still played oboe in the orchestra and wrote tunes for the orchestra to play, an attempt to alleviate the monotony of playing the same music every night. (According to his daughter, Judith Ann Still, Gershwin attended one of these performances, "borrowed" one of these tunes and wrote *I Got Rhythm*.)

But popular music wasn't enough for Still. According to Judith Still, her father meditated regularly and one day received a message from God to pursue classical music "as a way of bringing the races together." Traveling with Handy in the south Still had seen the lynching of black men by whites and knew there was a great deal of healing to be done. Music would be his way of trying to bring about that healing.

To do this, Still felt he needed more instruction. He enrolled at Oberlin using funds from his father's legacy and later, when the faculty there realized his potential, through a scholarship established just for him. Still also studied with George Chadwick at the New England Conservatory and later with modernist composer Edgard Varèse.

Much of Still's output in the 1920's included operas (*Blue Steel*, *A Bayou Legend*) and ballets (*La guiabliesse*, *Sahdji*) but Still also wrote some chamber works (*From the Black Belt*) and began work on his First Symphony, the *Afro-American*. Still often dealt with African-American themes in his music and loved to weave in African-American and folk idioms. "He was the original crossover artist," Judith Still says. "And the crowds loved it." Still's music was very well received all over Europe and here in the United States –when he could get it performed.

From the late 1920's until 1949 when his opera *Troubled Island* debuted, Still enjoyed great success in the classical realm, especially for a person of color in America. His many firsts include being the first African-American to have a symphony performed by a leading orchestra (Rochester Philharmonic) and the first African-American to conduct a major orchestra (L.A. Philharmonic).

In the mid-1930s Still moved to Los Angeles where he met Verna Arvey, a concert pianist and author. When the two decided to marry in 1939, they had to go to Mexico to do it; Arvey was white and interracial marriages were illegal at the time. The two were life-long partners and Arvey eventually began writing librettos for Still who was apparently quite pleased with her work; Still soon stopped using his old librettist.

But financial success would not last. *Troubled Island*, Still's ballet based on the life of Haitian liberator Jean Jacques Dessalines, was produced by the New York City Center Opera Company in 1949 (yet another Still first). Still began the opera in 1937 and news of its creation interested VIPs like Leopold Stokowski and Eleanor Roosevelt. When it was finally debuted, the audience in attendance loved it; but the critics found a way to cast negativity on the opera. "A conspiracy developed," Judith Still says. "Howard Taubmann (a critic and friend of Still) came to my father and said 'Billy, because I'm your friend I think that I should tell you this – the critics have had a meeting to decide what to do about your opera. They think the colored boy has gone far enough and they have voted to pan your opera.' And that was it. In those days, critics had that kind of influence."

Troubled Island did not get another performance and Still's reputation suffered. Though he continued to write classical music, mostly in the smaller chamber setting, he found it almost impossible to get any of his works performed. To make ends meet Still wrote for radio, television and film. Radio's popular *Deep River Hour*, films such as *Stormy Weather* and *Lost Horizon* and numerous television programs including *Perry Mason* and *Gunsmoke* are just a few of his credits.

Still encountered a good deal of racism in these endeavors as well, but it didn't bother him as much as one might think. "My parents had many, many friends – in fact the neighbors used to complain that the Still's friends parked up the street," Judith Still says. "I guess my father didn't have too hard a time putting up with it all because he was always off in a cloud. He was a dreamer. He was always just wrapped up in writing music and didn't concentrate on what people said about him."

By his death in 1978, Still had composed over 200 works including nine operas, five ballets and five symphonies. Still's works weren't performed much in his lifetime, but his family is changing that trend. Since his death, Still's family has worked tirelessly to get his works performed

and recorded. They've been greatly successful, but according to Judith Still, there's still a long way to go.