



AMERICAN CLASSICS



WILLIAM GRANT STILL

Symphonies Nos. 4 and 5 Poem for Orchestra

Fort Smith Symphony • John Jeter



William Grant Still (1895–1978)
Symphony No. 5 ‘Western Hemisphere’
Poem for Orchestra
Symphony No. 4 ‘Autochthonous’

The life and career of the African-American composer William Grant Still qualifies as the quintessential American “success story”. Often referred to as the “dean of African-American composers”, Still was born in Woodville, Mississippi on 11th May, 1895, to a family of Negro, Indian, Spanish, Irish and Scotch blood. Still’s father, the town bandmaster, died when William was three, precipitating a move to Little Rock, Arkansas, where Still’s mother was a teacher. There, Still had his first musical experience, studying the violin. At his mother’s urging he began medical studies but dropped out as music exerted a stronger pull. Music study at Oberlin was interrupted by naval service in World War I. After the war, Still moved to New York, where he worked as an arranger for several popular performers including W.C. Handy (composer of the immortal *St. Louis Blues*) and Artie Shaw, whose hit, *Frenesi*, he orchestrated. Still gained immeasurable experience playing the oboe in Broadway pit orchestras while studying composition with the conservative George Chadwick and the ultra-modernist Edgar Varèse. He arrived in New York at the perfect time, actively participating in the Harlem Renaissance, the cultural awakening of African-Americans in the 1920s. His attention turned to classical composition for good in the late 1920s. A move to Los Angeles in 1930 to arrange for Paul Whiteman expanded his horizons into film and radio, initiating his compositional maturity and most prolific period. That same year saw the creation of his *Symphony No. 1 ‘Afro-American’*, which established and sustained his reputation, remaining his most popular and frequently recorded work.

Like many African-Americans of his generation, Still achieved many ‘firsts’: first to have a symphony performed by a major symphony orchestra (1935, New York Philharmonic, *Afro-American*); first to conduct a major orchestra (1936, Los Angeles Philharmonic); first to

conduct an orchestra in the Deep South (1955, New Orleans Philharmonic); first to have an opera produced by a major company (1949, *Troubled Island*, New York City Opera), and first to have an opera broadcast on television (posthumously in 1981, *A Bayou Legend*, PBS). Still received many honours including the Guggenheim fellowship, honorary doctorates from Oberlin among others, and the key to his home state in 1975. He died in Los Angeles on 3rd December, 1978.

Still’s most distinctive works are nationalistic, using African-American forms such as the blues, spirituals, and jazz in addition to other ethnic American musics. After an early flirtation with avant-garde techniques, he returned to a neo-romantic idiom with lyrical melody and traditional harmony. His work retains a freshness with immediate appeal. Still, a deeply religious man, inscribed each of his works to God, “the source of all inspiration”.

The *Fifth Symphony* was originally the *Third Symphony* before Still withdrew it. After the creation of the *Fourth Symphony*, he revised the work as the *Fifth Symphony*. The composer’s wife Verna Arvey, speaking for him, gave descriptive titles to the symphony’s four movements:

1. “*The vigorous, life-sustaining forces of the Hemisphere*” (briskly) 2. “*The natural beauties of the Hemisphere*” (slower, and with utmost grace) 3. “*The nervous energy of the Hemisphere*” (energetically) 4. “*The overshadowing spirit of kindness and justice in the Hemisphere*” (moderately). The revised work was given its première by the Oberlin College Orchestra under the direction of Robert Baustian at the celebration of the composer’s 75th birthday on 9th November, 1970.

As with many of his works, Still wrote “absolute” music, adding a program after completion. He affixed a prefatory text to the *Fifth Symphony* expressing his thoughts during its composition:

One day in eternity has come to its close. A mighty

civilization has begun, come to a climax, and declined. In the darkness, the past is swept away. When the new day dawns, the lands of the Western Hemisphere are raised from the bosom of the Atlantic. They are endowed by the Great Intelligence who created them and who controls their destiny with virtues unlike any that have gone before: qualities which will find counterparts in the characters of the men who will inhabit them eventually, and who will make them the abode of freedoms, of friendship, of the sharing of resources and achievements of the mind and of the spirit. These are our fellow-Americans in Latin America, Canada, and the islands of the Western Seas, who are today working with us to convert our ideals into realities.

The first movement immediately presents the main theme, a three-note motive encompassing a minor third. This motive rises up the diminished scale along with a great deal of syncopation, creating a tense, brooding atmosphere. The second theme presented in the woodwinds, more happy and optimistic, tosses a two-note motive over more syncopation. A loud rising scale figure heralds the development of the second theme in the strings, becoming more agitated, and leading to the recap of the main theme in the strings. This builds quickly to a dramatic tutti climax with a tragic, brusque end. The slow movement portrays a tropical atmosphere where Still's orchestrational skill comes to the fore. An expressive, languorous melody in the violins glides over pulsing marimba chords. The three-note motive of the first movement reappears, adding an element of tension. The coda subsumes the motive into a peaceful ending. The nervous energy of the first movement returns intensified in the angular melodic figures and obsessive march rhythm of the scherzo. A two-note figure is tossed about violently as the movement charges to a bleak end in the minor. Dynamic rhythms and optimistic melodic figures initiate the finale, building to a great climax which slows to reveal an expansive melody in full strings. Sumptuously orchestrated and full of hope, this melody builds in warmth to cap the work in glowing affirmation. Still, a man of peace, expressed through this work the optimistic

postwar vision of America freshly empowered as the savior of world freedom, prepared to spread that light to all humanity.

Poem for Orchestra was commissioned by the Kulas American Composers' Fund for the Cleveland Orchestra at the suggestion of then music director Erich Leinsdorf. The work was first performed in Cleveland with Rudolph Ringwall conducting on 7th and 9th December, 1944, later receiving a New York Philharmonic performance under Artur Rodzinski.

The *Poem*, "one of Still's key works" in the words of Robert Barlett Haas, is an extensive symphonic poem "inspired by the concept of a world being reborn spiritually after a period of darkness and desolation" in the words of Verna Arvey. The impassioned, angular opening section (a reflection of wartime deprivation) holds sway to the midpoint of the work, growing to a large climactic tutti capped by brass fanfares before collapsing into a glowing string melody representing the "coming to spiritual consciousness". This "musical climax of hope" (in the words of contemporary reviewers) builds to a radiant ending on a major seventh sonority colored by a minor third.

Regarding the *Fourth Symphony*, Still remarked:

As the subtitle indicates, the *Fourth Symphony* has its roots in our own soil, but rather than being aboriginal or indigenous, it is intended to represent the spirit of the American people. The composer has described its four movements in this way: 1. *Moderately*: The spirit of optimism and energy: the American ability to 'get things done' 2. *Slowly*: pensive, then later in the second subject, animated in a folkly way 3. *With a graceful lilt*: humorous and unmistakably typical of our country and its rhythms 4. *Slowly and reverently*: the warmth and the spiritual side of the American people – their love of mankind. It may also be said that the music speaks of the fusion of musical cultures in North America.

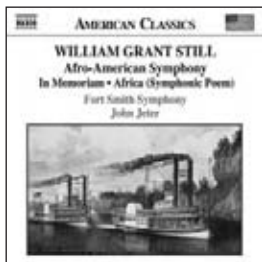
The symphony is dedicated to one of the composer's early teachers, Maurice Kessler of Oberlin. It was given its première by Victor Alessandro and the Oklahoma City Symphony Orchestra on 18th March, 1951.

The first movement, in sonata form, uses thematic transformation, beginning with a melody in the bass instruments later transformed into the movement's second theme. The main theme, the *idée fixe* of the entire work, soon appears in chordal strings, and appears throughout, unifying the work. Legato muted trumpets present the second theme. The slow movement begins with the *idée fixe*, in the style of a spiritual, in the flute, while the main theme is an oboe solo. The *idée fixe* reappears in the violins as the tempo increases. When the original tempo returns, the main theme appears in flute and harp, followed by the *idée fixe*. Luminous strings evaporate at the close.

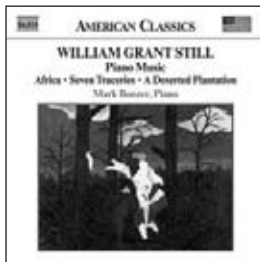
The third movement is a jazz scherzo. Clarinet and bassoon over brushes on drum and suspended cymbal set the stage for the principal theme in flutes and oboe under a walking bassline. The *idée fixe* appears as a second theme in three flutes. A powerful melancholic theme in the violins begins the finale. It alternates with two episodes, one in faster tempo developing the *idée fixe* as the second uses a seven-note motive taken from the main theme. The music strides forth as the motive leads to a noble, affirmative peroration combining both themes.

David Ciucevich Jr.

Also available:



8.559174



8.559210



John Jeter

John Jeter ('Jetter') has been the music director and conductor of the Fort Smith Symphony since 1997. He is also the recipient of the 2002 Helen M. Thompson Award presented by the American Symphony Orchestra League. This award is given to one outstanding 'early career' music director in the United States every two years. It is one of the few awards given to conductors in America. He is the recipient of the Mayor's Achievement Award for his services to the City of Fort Smith. John Jeter has guest conducted numerous orchestras including the Springfield Symphony, Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, Oklahoma City Philharmonic, Arkansas Symphony Orchestra, North Arkansas Symphony Orchestra, Charleston Symphony, Gulf Coast Symphony and Illinois Chamber Symphony among many others. He co-hosts two radio programmes and is involved in many radio and television projects concerning classical music. He received his formal education at the University of Hartford's Hart School of Music and Butler University's Jordan College of Fine Arts.

Fort Smith Symphony

Founded in 1923, the Fort Smith Symphony is the oldest orchestra in the state of Arkansas. The orchestra is a per service professional ensemble drawn from musicians throughout the region. The orchestra performs classics, pops and educational concerts in the Arkansas Best Corporation Performing Arts Center in Fort Smith. Committed to education, the orchestra presents numerous educational programmes including a composer in residence programme, ensembles and guest artists in the schools and 'Earquake!™' multi-media concerts for school children.



Fort Smith Symphony

(John Jeter, Music Director)

First Violin

Elizabeth Lyon,
Concertmaster
Lori Fay,
Karen Jeter,
Associate Concertmasters
Carol Harrison,
Densi Rushing,
Er-Gené Kahng,
Assistant Concertmasters

Arthur Busby
Timothy Hsu
Christy Paxton
Douglas Droste
Steven Hughes, II
Chris Pinkston
Natasha Nottoli
Katie Barton-Waid
Oksana Pavilionis
Chun-Yu Chen

Second Violin

Ty Myers, *Principal*
Aquiles Figueroa,
Assistant Principal
Nan Lu
Carla Geter
Greta Burdick
Justin Pourtorkan
Nicole Melki
Martha Scott Cox
Tara Mueller
Melody Garrett
Linda Hills
James Ruggles
Richard Falkner
Machelle Ward
Jeanne Kierre

Viola

Darrel Barnes, *Principal*
Anitra Fay,
Assistant Principal
Jesse Collett
Kirsten Weingartner Weiss
Kathy Murray
Mary Ann Saylor
Erika C. Lawson
Elizabeth Meisinger
Christy Genn
Sara Morrow
Viktoria Matheson
Curtis Hansen
Charlotte Scott

Cello

Stephanie Lemoine,
Co-Principal
Joan Gasaway,
Co-Principal
William Elliott
Barbara Godette
Brady Lanier
Chris Corbishley
Jason Jupiterwala
James T. Rollins
Jill Winter Morgan
Kaia Holder
Josh Klossner
Pola Benke

Double Bass

Jerry Lane, *Principal*
Wayne Warmack
John Schimek
Karol Kowal
Greg Moore
Cody Sisk

Mark Phillips
John Widder
Marlo Williams
Nicholas Barnaby
Samuel Hinson

Flute

Elizabeth Shuhan,
Principal
Emmaline McLeod
Julie Konzelman

Piccolo

Julie Konzelman, *Principal*

Oboe

Theresa Delaplain,
Principal
Lorraine Duso

English Horn

Suzanne McGowen,
Principal

Clarinet

Tom Flocks, *Principal*
Randy Harper

Bass Clarinet

Kristi Sturgeon, *Principal*

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Richard Ramey, *Principal*
Susie Brown

Contrabassoon

Richard Bobo, *Principal*

Horn

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Principal
Richard Ruhe

Jack Jackson, II
Jane Waters-Showalter

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Angela Richards, *Principal*
Ryan Gardner
Penny Schimek

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Brian Haaapanen, *Principal*
Vernon Howard

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Tuba

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Timpani

Philip Parker, *Principal*

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David Ewing, *Principal*
Lance Drege
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Often referred to as the 'dean of African-American composers', William Grant Still received many honours for his pioneering music for the concert platform, film and television. Still's most distinctive works use African-American forms such as the blues, spirituals and jazz within a neo-romantic idiom. He declared that his *Fourth Symphony* was 'intended to represent the spirit of the American people', an idée fixe unifying its four contrasting movements into an appealing whole. His triumphant *Fifth Symphony* celebrates 'the sharing of resources and achievements' which the composer saw as the key to America's greatness.

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**William Grant
STILL**
(1895–1978)

**Symphony No. 5
'Western Hemisphere'**
(1945, rev. 1970)

- | | | |
|----------|--------------------------------------|--------------|
| 1 | Briskly | 3:20 |
| 2 | Slower, and with utmost grace | 6:36 |
| 3 | Energetically | 2:48 |
| 4 | Moderately | 6:48 |
| 5 | Poem for Orchestra (1944) | 10:27 |

**Symphony No. 4
'Autochthonous' (1947)**

- | | | |
|----------|------------------------------|--------------|
| 6 | Moderately | 6:08 |
| 7 | Slowly | 6:54 |
| 8 | With a graceful lilt | 3:03 |
| 9 | Slowly and reverently | 10:04 |

**Fort Smith Symphony
John Jeter**

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Playing
Time:
56:24

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