William Grant Still was born in Mississippi in 1895, grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, worked toward a bachelor’s degree from Wilberforce University, Wilberforce, Ohio, and then attended the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Oberlin, Ohio. In 1922 he studied composition privately with George Chadwick at the New England Conservatory of Music, Boston, on a special scholarship. From 1923 to 1925 he studied with Edgar Varèse, whose style he eventually rejected as unsuitable for him. In 1934 he moved to Los Angeles, where he died in 1978.

Still played many instruments, particularly the oboe, violin, and cello, and earned his living for many years playing in pit orchestras for W. C. Handy, Sophie Tucker, Paul Whiteman, Artie Shaw, and others. He also worked as an arranger and orchestrator of popular and commercial music; for several years he arranged and conducted music for the radio show “Deep River Hour” broadcast over CBS and WOR.

He started to gain recognition as a serious composer in the 1920s. At the same time he began a long and valued friendship with Howard Hanson, Director of the Eastman School of Music, Rochester, New York. He received many awards and scholarships during his lifetime, including Guggenheim and Rosenwald Fellowships. He also achieved several firsts: he was the first African-American composer in the United States to have a major symphony performed by a major orchestra (the Afro-American Symphony, by the Rochester Philharmonic under Howard Hanson), the first to conduct a major orchestra in a performance of his own works (the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl in 1936), the first to conduct a major orchestra in the deep South (New Orleans Philharmonic, 1955), the first to have an opera produced by a major company (Troubled Island, City Center of Music and Drama, New York City, 1949), the first to have an opera televised over a national network, and the first of his race to conduct a white radio orchestra in New York City.

It is to some extent an indictment of American society in the 1940s, ’50s, and ’60s that we know so little of Still’s music today. Black American musicians had great difficulty getting their music performed; canceled performances, missing instrumental parts, and revoked commissions were commonplace. Still and others, including Deems Taylor and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, were much more successful composers than their legacy reveals. In fact, the more successful these composers were in what was considered the province of white “classical” composers, the more trouble they had, and the less we know of them. Perhaps this is why, in part, we know so much of African-Americans’ spiritual literature and so little of their other output.

Still wrote a tremendous amount of art music. He was passionately interested in opera and wrote many, at least ten of which are extant. Still considered opera a form that included all the formal musical idioms: orchestral music, choral music, chamber music, dance, and song. He produced a number of ballets as well as symphonic, vocal, and choral music. His list of works, available from William Grant Still Music, is thirty pages long. Following is a discussion of selected choral music from that catalog.

Larger Choral Works

Of the more than thirty vocal works with orchestra composed by Still, most are available with alternate piano accompaniments. The cantata And They Lynched Him on a Tree resulted from a meeting with poet Katherine Garrison Chapin. Moved by the mob violence of the 1930s, she produced a powerful poem of protest. Alain Locke, the famed African-American writer who taught at Howard University, Washington, D.C., persuaded Chapin that Still should set her ballad to music. The composer visited Chapin in the fall of 1939,
heard the poem, and was “immediately afire with musical ideas and potential themes.” Still began the work immediately and completed it in April 1940.

The collaboration between a black composer and the white wife of the Solicitor General, Francis Biddle, on the sensitive subject of lynching generated a great deal of interest. After much publicity, conductor Artur Rodzinski premiered the work with the New York Philharmonic in New York City on June 25. Also on the program was Roy Harris’s Challenge, 1940 and Earl Robinson’s Ballad for Americans, featuring Paul Robeson. The performance, heard by thirteen thousand people, was a great success, and the full production was repeated in Washington, D.C., in December and again in New York the following summer under Hugh Ross. The work was broadcast on April 14, 1942, under the direction of Leopold Stokowski, with the NBC Orchestra, the Eva Jessye Choir, Robert Shaw’s Collegiate Chorale, and soloist Louise Burge.

The performing forces for Still’s nineteen-minute work are considerable: two choruses are needed, one black, one white (Chapin’s idea, according to biographer Verna Arvey); a full symphonic orchestra; a contralto soloist; and a narrator. The story begins just after a white mob has broken into a town jail, removed a young black man (incarcerated for an unnamed crime), and lynched him. The white crowd is breaking up and going home, and gradually the friends of the black man come out from their hiding places to view with horror the spectacle before them. The contralto takes the role of the young man’s mother. In some of the most heartfelt music one can imagine, she sings about her boy and her sorrow, joined by the boy’s friends. In a powerful climax, black and white choruses join together to cut him down from the tree, ending with the words: “O trust your brother and reach out your hand! And clear the shadow that falls across the land!” At the suggestion of Rodzinski, whose native Poland had just been invaded by the Nazis, the last lines were changed slightly by the poet to conclude with a more hopeful and positive tone.

This work has lost none of its appeal and its ability to move the listener in the last fifty years; it is well worth the effort to mount. The chorus parts are not difficult, and the work can be done with one large chorus assuming the roles of the two crowds, though some of the visual drama is lost. The most difficult writing is for the strings.

Christmas in the Western World (1967) is approximately twenty minutes long and is scored for SATB chorus or quartet and piano, or string quartet and piano, or string orchestra and piano. There are ten movements, each a folk song from a Western country. Represented are Argentina, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Trinidad, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Brazil, French Canada, Canadian Indian, and, to end the set, a song in the style of a spiritual but completely original. The texts, adapted by the composer’s wife, are unfortunately all in English. She also has supplied brief narrations to be spoken between songs; with minor adjustments these can be used as program notes instead.

The songs are all rather simple, and to some extent they may be found to be stereotypical, but they also are beautiful and touching. They contain moments of great fun, as tango and calypso rhythms appear in various pieces. The Canadian Indian song is “Jesous Ahatonhia,” which begins “‘Twas in the moon of winter-time”; it has appeared in several recently published arrangements. The set is not difficult but is wonderfully rewarding for singers and audience. Published by Peer Southern Music, the work offers a nice
alternative to the more frequently performed holiday sets.

Still's largest choral work is *Caribbean Melodies*, settings of Caribbean folk songs collected by Zora Neale Hurston. The work is set for SATBB chorus, dancers, six soloists (SSAATB), drums, tom-toms, vegetable grater(!), rattle, and piano (or orchestra). Written in 1941, it is sixty minutes long and available through WGSM.

*A Psalm for the Living* (Bourne Music), for large chorus and orchestra, is a ten-minute piece on an original text by Arvey and is a good example of the composer's style. *Plain Chant for America* (WGSM), on a powerful text by Chapin, was premiered in the fall of 1941 by John Barbirolli and the New York Philharmonic. It is ten minutes long and can be performed by either baritone soloist and piano, baritone and orchestra, or SATB chorus and either piano or orchestra. *From a Lost Continent* (WGSM) is approximately fifteen minutes long and calls for large chorus, soprano and tenor soli, and orchestra of winds, strings, and much percussion. The story, similar to the Atlantis legend, concerns an ancient lost continent. There are four choral sections, titled "Song of Worship," "Song for Dancers," "Song of Yearning," and "Song of Magic," in a language invented by the composer.

Several other works in the ten-to-fifteen-minute range are available from WGSM (unless otherwise noted). They include *Wailing Woman* (large chorus, orchestra, and soprano soloist), the four-movement *Rhapsody* (for the same forces; soprano and piano; soprano, piano, and string quartet; or soprano, chorus, and piano); *Those Who Wait* (SSATBB chorus, soprano and tenor soli, and large orchestra [Bourne]); and an orchestrated version of *Three Rhythmic Spirituals* (Bourne) discussed below.

**Smaller Choral Works**

Stylistically, Still's spirituals contain a mixture of elements found in spirituals, gospel songs, and blues (reflecting his early work in blues with W. C. Handy). One of his most popular sets is *Three Rhythmic Spirituals* (Bourne): "Lord, I Looked down the Road," "Hard Trials," and "Holy Spirit, Don't You Leave Me." Accompanied by piano, these are excellent examples of Still's hybrid gospel-blues style. Each
spiritual is fairly short and not difficult. The outer two make use of soloists, but the demands are not great; indeed, the solo parts could be sung by an entire section. These (as well as his other spirituals) could be used quite effectively in a church setting ("Holy Spirit, Don’t You Leave Me" works well for Pentecost).

Still arranged two familiar tunes for chorus and piano: Little David, Play on Your Harp and Steal Away to Jesus. The former is set for SSATB, with the basses and piano forming two ostinatos under the melody for much of the piece. The latter piece is scored for SSATB with soprano and tenor soli. Like many settings of this spiritual, it is touchingly beautiful. Both works are in the William Dawson spiritual style, showing little blues influence. Available from WGSM, they would make an attractive pairing on a concert program. Several other short spirituals are found in the WGSM catalog, including We Sang Our Songs for SATB with piano accompaniment, written in honor of the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

Theodore Presser Company includes many of Still’s spirituals in its catalog. These include The Blind Man, SSA, SAB, or SATB; Here’s One, SATB and soprano solo; Every Time I Feel the Spirit, SATB; Is There Anybody Here, SATB; Where Shall I Be, SSA, SAB, or SATB; and I Feel Like My Time Ain’t Long, SATB. All are fairly short and, except for the last, accompanied by piano.

Finally, the spiritual I’m Gonna Tell What Ma Lord Has Done fo’ Me, is an excerpt from one of Still’s best-known works, the ballet Lenox Avenue. Scored for SATB with piano, it is in his gospel-blues style and is somewhat longer than the above-mentioned spirituals.

Still’s works outside the category of spirituals reveal a personal approach influenced by the many styles in his background. Representative examples include Minorities and Majorities and Toward Distant Shores, both for SATB and piano; Lift Every Voice and Sing, the African national anthem arranged for voices, flute, piano, and strings; Lament, women’s trio and piano; and Rising Tide, also called Victory and Song of a City, SATB, SSAATB, SATBB, or TTBB. Still wrote The Voice of the Lord (SATB, tenor soloist, and organ) for the Park Avenue Synagogue. One of his most beautiful short works, All That I Am, sets a text by Arvey for SATB, soprano and tenor soli, and organ. Called “an original hymn,” it is simple and stunningly beautiful (available from WGSM).

It is hoped that this information stimulates the reader to seek out Still’s choral music. Still combined a great richness of compositional inspiration with a wealth of musical traditions to create new flavors. Too long overlooked, Still’s music deserves to become much better known among choral conductors.

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