



AMERICAN CLASSICS



WILLIAM DAWSON

Negro Folk Symphony

ULYSSES KAY

Fantasy Variations • Umbrian Scene

ORF Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra

Arthur Fagen

William Levi Dawson (1899–1990): Negro Folk Symphony

Ulysses Simpson Kay (1917–1995): Fantasy Variations • Umbrian Scene

William Dawson ran away from home at the age of 13 to study at the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama. Founded in 1881 by Booker T. Washington to provide practical training for African Americans, the Institute eventually broadened its focus to become an accredited, degree-granting institution. Dawson left there in 1921 to pursue further musical studies in Kansas City and at the American Conservatory in Chicago, but he returned to Tuskegee in 1931 to establish and lead its music department – a move that changed both his focus and his ultimate legacy. He spent approximately three years composing the *Negro Folk Symphony*, completing it in 1934 after winning two consecutive Wanamaker Foundation Awards in 1930 and 1931. Leopold Stokowski premiered the work with The Philadelphia Orchestra on 14 November 1934, following up with additional performances on the 16th and 17th and again on the 20th at Carnegie Hall (the February 16th performance was broadcast to a national audience over the CBS radio network).

Initially, the work was greeted with great enthusiasm. One critic observed, "It is no wonder Stokowski put his *Negro Symphony* [sic] last on the program, and no wonder the audience heralded the end of each movement with spontaneous applause and stood to cheer the young composer." Interest (and performances) soon waned, however, but Dawson did not lose faith in the *Symphony*. He revised it in 1952, following a trip to seven countries in West Africa, trying to, in his words, "[infuse] it with a rhythmic foundation strongly inspired by African influences." Shawnee Press published this revision in 1963 and Stokowski recorded it with the Symphony of the Air (the former NBC Symphony Orchestra) the following year. This is its third recording.

In a detailed study of the *Negro Folk Symphony* published in the *Black Music Research Journal*, musicologist John Andrew Johnson describes the work as "masterful on many levels. Each of its three movements, while cast in a traditional form, is ultimately not controlled

by these predetermined structures; rather, a continuous process of variation and development shapes its course." Dawson applies his own highly individual touches in a work that is both structured and freely programmatic. At the outset of the first movement, *The Bond of Africa*, he introduces a recurring motif – a sort of *idée fixe* – that he labeled the "missing link" to represent "the link [that] was taken out of a human chain when the first African was taken from the shores of his native land and sent to slavery." Solo horn announces the brief pentatonic idea that is soon repeated on English horn. After this slow introduction, Dawson begins the sonata-form movement with a principal theme – also introduced on horn – that is brief in duration but rife with possibilities for rhythmic development. The secondary theme, introduced on oboe, is based on an authentic spiritual, *Oh, My Little Soul Gwine-a Shine*. (It is worth noting that although Dawson uses several authentic melodies in the symphony, they are not well-known tunes and the composer uses them only in an excerpted, fragmentary way. No one walks away from the work humming *Deep River* or *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*.) The beginning of the development section is marked by a return of the somber "missing link" motif, which returns yet again before the recapitulation. Also in this movement, initially near the end of the exposition, Dawson adds rhythmic references to the Juba dance brought by slaves from the Kingdom of Kongo to plantations in South Carolina.

The second movement, entitled *Hope in the Night*, begins with three gong strokes intended by Dawson to represent the Trinity "that guides the destiny of man." Roughly in A–B–A form, with the A section marked *Andante* and the B section a much quicker *Allegretto*, it thus fulfills the roles of both a slow movement and a *scherzo* in a traditional four-movement symphonic structure. The A theme, introduced on English horn, is a variant of the "missing link" motif (with rising rather than descending intervals), which Dawson meant to suggest "the monotonous life of the people who were held in

bondage for 250 years." He intended the *scherzando* B theme (introduced by two oboes) to symbolize "the merry play of children yet unaware of the hopelessness beclouding their future." But the playful theme is interrupted by a return of the ominous "missing link" motif and a brief reprise of the opening idea (separated by a remarkable transition orchestrated for string quartet and solo woodwinds). When the A section finally returns, it is with full orchestra and a heavy tread marked by timpani and chimes. The "missing link" motif makes yet another appearance, and the movement closes with gloomy string sustains growing from *pianississimo* to *fortississimo* and back again over a fatalistic drumbeat.

The concluding movement – again in sonata form – takes its title from the first of two spiritual tunes that make up its themes: *O, Le' Me Shine, Shine Like a Morning Star!* Begun on oboe and soon taken up by other woodwinds, it is characterized by its long-held opening pitch, which Dawson uses to create tension by adding a *crescendo*. The second theme is also based on a spiritual, *Hallelujah, Lord, I Been Down Into the Sea*, again begun by oboe and then repeated on clarinet. The "missing link" motif is absent from this movement, although it bears a slight similarity to the first four notes of *O, Le' Me Shine*, suggesting the latter may have inspired it. The Juba rhythms return in the development section, and the piece concludes with a magnificent coda featuring prominent timpani and syncopation.

The premiere of the symphony was followed by performances in Birmingham, Alabama, but after 1936 the work simply fell off the radar – partly because there was only one full score and set of parts – until Stokowski's recording. For Dawson, it became a road not travelled since he spent the rest of his career focusing mostly on music education, choral performance and arranging.

Ulysses Kay was also a music educator, teaching at several universities, including a 20-year career at the Herbert H. Lehman College of the City University of New York. As a composer, he was more prolific than Dawson, leaving behind approximately 140 works for orchestra, chorus, chamber ensembles, piano, voice, organ and band; he also wrote five operas as well as scores for film

and television. While Kay was studying at the University of Arizona, William Grant Still encouraged him to become a composer, and the aspiring musician went on to study with Bernard Rogers, Howard Hanson and Paul Hindemith.

Conductor Arthur Bennett Lipkin commissioned Kay's *Fantasy Variations* for the Portland (Maine) Symphony Orchestra, which premiered the work on 19 November 1963. It might also be called *Variations in Search of a Theme* since the actual theme does not appear until the end, after an introduction and 13 variations. About the work, the composer wrote:

"Over the years musical ideas or materials occur to a composer as he works along from day to day. Most often these ideas are fragmentary motives, distinctive rhythms, or merely relationships between notes. In themselves the import of these ideas is negligible, but they are important for the composer, for they are the raw material out of which a composition grows.

Just such an experience happened to me, beginning in 1958, with the materials used in my *Fantasy Variations*. The opening horn motive was jotted down then in my sketchbook, and other related ideas came to me from time to time. Though I had no idea what kind of piece these ideas might make, they stayed on my mind until Mr. Lipkin commissioned an orchestral piece from me. Then their purpose became clear, and I wrote the work between March and July of 1963."

The piece opens with a four-note cell in Phrygian mode announced by solo horn. Although this cell is not the theme, it is an important thematic element throughout the work. It appears – sometimes transposed and rhythmically or melodically modified (including retrograde) – in all variations except 5, 6 and 7. It is not always apparent to the ear, but it is a significant structural device that helps unify the work.

Kay's melodic lines move freely between diatonicism and chromaticism, and his harmonies make judicious,

expressive use of dissonance – including the intermittent appearance of tone clusters (as in *Variation 7*). The variations flow together without breaks, and can be distinguished one from the other as much by the textures and orchestral colors Kay deploys as by their melodic or harmonic content. When the theme finally arrives, first on brass and later on strings, the first seven notes incorporate the four-note cell, reasserting its importance as the *urmotiv* of the entire work.

Also in 1963, Edward Benjamin commissioned Kay to compose a piece for the New Orleans Philharmonic Symphony. Several years earlier, the New Orleans industrialist and philanthropist had established the Edward Benjamin Award for Restful Music for composition students at the Eastman School of Music, encouraging them to write pieces that conformed to his personal idea of musical beauty. The commissioning series was later expanded to include The Philadelphia Orchestra and other ensembles. Kay described the invitation as “a joy and a challenge – a challenge because the piece wanted was to be of symphonic proportions, ten to twelve minutes in length, and quiet or restful in mood.” Searching for ideas for the piece, Kay recalled the time he spent in Italy as winner of the 1949 Prix de Rome (his second time to win the coveted prize).

“I remembered the wonder and magic I had felt while I attended the Festival of Sacred Music near Perugia ... in the fall of 1950. I recalled the antiphonal instrumental music, the glorious choral singing there in the old chapels of Umbria, an ancient district of Italy, comprised of the provinces of Perugia and Terni. I thought of my visits to the historic towns of Arezzo, Assisi and Narni – of the rugged hills and beautiful valleys of the terrain. And [thus] came the inspiration for writing my *Umbrian Scene*, as an evocation of the wonderful time I spent in that part of Italy.”

Listeners looking for Italian musical tropes in *Umbrian Scene* will be disappointed. The piece is, in fact, highly Germanic in tone. From the sparse opening that suggests a Schönbergian tone row (clarinet doubled by muted solo viola) to the intimations of Webernian Klangfarbenmelodie, the work is rife with lean melodic lines played in counterpoint with one another. There is very little in the way of chordal structure until the climax (about two-thirds of the way through), which is marked by a somber chorale on muted brass. There are numerous tone clusters (as in *Fantasy Variations*), and the piece ends as mysteriously as it began, with a return of the clarinet/viola duet (although this time the strings are *tutti*) and, ultimately, the solemn stroke of a gong.

Frank K. DeWald

ORF Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra



Photo: Lukas Beck

An ensemble of international renown, the ORF Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra (Vienna RSO) is a paragon of Viennese orchestral tradition. Known for its exceptional programming, the orchestra combines 19th-century repertoire with contemporary works and rarely performed pieces from other periods. All Vienna RSO performances are broadcast on the radio, and the orchestra performs in two subscription series in Vienna, in the Musikverein and the Konzerthaus. In addition, it appears every year at major Austrian and international festivals, such as the Salzburg Festival, musikprotokoll im steirischen herbst and Wien Modern. The Vienna RSO enjoys a successful collaboration with the Theater an der Wien, has an excellent reputation as an opera orchestra, and is also equally at home in the film music genre. The orchestra regularly tours internationally, and its discography spans a broad range of cross-genre recordings. Under the leadership of its former chief conductors, which include Milan Horvat, Leif Segerstam, Lothar Zagrosek, Pinchas Steinberg, Dennis Russell Davies, Bertrand de Billy and Cornelius Meister, the orchestra has continuously expanded its repertoire and its international reputation. Marin Alsop has served as chief conductor since September 2019.

www.rso.orf.at

Arthur Fagen



Photo: Indiana University
Jacobs School of Music

Arthur Fagen has conducted at the world's most prestigious opera houses including the Metropolitan Opera and Vienna State Opera, and has led acclaimed orchestras such as the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande and Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie. He has recently conducted the London Symphony Orchestra, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and the Philharmonia. Fagen has served as principal conductor in Kassel and Brunswick, chief conductor of the Vlaamse Opera and music director of the Queens Symphony Orchestra. From 2002 to 2007, he was music director of the Dortmund Philharmonic Orchestra and the Dortmund Opera. Fagen has made recordings for BMG, Bayerischer Rundfunk, SFB, and WDR Cologne. He regularly records for Naxos, with releases including a cycle of the Martinů *Symphonies* [8.553348, 8.553349, 8.553350], and a recording of Martinů's *Piano Concertos Nos. 3 and 5* with Giorgio Koukl [8.572206], which was selected as an Editor's Choice in the March 2010 issue of *Gramophone* magazine. Fagen has been music director of The Atlanta Opera since 2010 and is also chair of orchestral conducting at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music in Bloomington.

fagen.chronosartists.com

William Levi
DAWSON
(1899–1990)

Negro Folk Symphony
(c. 1932–34, rev. 1952)

33:01

- ❶ The Bond of Africa **12:04**
- ❷ Hope in the Night **12:38**
- ❸ O, Le' Me Shine, Shine Like a Morning Star!

Ulysses Simpson
KAY
(1917–1995)

- ❹ Fantasy Variations (1963) **17:53**
- ❺ Umbrian Scene (1963) **13:37**

**ORF Vienna Radio
Symphony Orchestra**
Arthur Fagen



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AMERICAN CLASSICS

William Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony* was premiered by Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1934 to huge enthusiasm. Its traditional form houses a continuous process of variation and introduces little-known spirituals in fragmentary form, while the work's recurring motifs, remarkable transitions and syncopations are enhanced in Dawson's 1952 revision heard here. The *Fantasy Variations* by composer and teacher Ulysses Kay employs dissonance with great expressivity in a work of textural and coloristic variety. *Umbrian Scene*, despite its pictorial suggestion, is lean and sombre.

www.naxos.com

Playing
Time:
64:42