



WILLIAM GRANT STILL

Symphonies Nos. 2 and 3 • Wood Notes

Fort Smith Symphony • John Jeter



William Grant Still (1895-1978): Wood Notes • Symphony No. 2 'Song of a New Race' Symphony No. 3 'The Sunday Symphony'

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 May 11, 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. Still arrived in New York at the perfect time, actively participating in the cultural awakening of African-Americans in the 1920s known as the "Harlem Renaissance". 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 African-American 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 honors 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 December 3, 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, Still returned to a neo-romantic idiom with lyrical melody and traditional harmony. His work retains a freshness with immediate appeal. Still, a deeply spiritual man, inscribed each of his works to God, "the source of all inspiration."

The orchestral suite *Wood Notes* (receiving its world premiere recording here) was originally cast in five movements but the publisher chose to delete the final movement, creating the four-movement version recorded here. The work takes its inspiration from the American Southern poet J. Mitchell Pilcher. The four movements are entitled: I. *Singing River* (Moderately slow), II. *Autumn Night* (Lightly), III. *Moon Dusk* (Slowly and expressively), and IV. *Whippoorwill's Shoes* (Humorously). The premiere by the eminent conductor Arthur Rodziński and the Chicago Symphony took place on April 22, 1948. Contemporary reviewers took note of the work's "pleasantness" and "personality". *Wood Notes* is dedicated to one of Still's Oberlin instructors, F.J. Lehmann. It is scored for full or reduced orchestra. The "Dvořákian" colors (use of the woodwind choir with pentatonic melodic figures) reinforce and enhance the pastoral mood, along with Still's impressionistic textures.

In the early 1920s, Still envisioned a trilogy of works depicting the African-American experience: the

symphonic poem *Africa* representing their roots, the *Symphony No. 1 'Afro-American'* (life in America to emancipation) (both works recorded on Naxos 8.559174), and the *Symphony No. 2 in G Minor 'Song of a New Race'* (a vision of an integrated society). Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra premiered the *Symphony No. 2* on December 10, 1937 to rapturous reviews. Contemporary reviewers found it "of absorbing interest, unmistakably racial in thematic materials and rhythms, and triumphantly articulate in expressions of moods, ranging from the exuberance of jazz to brooding wistfulness." Still's typically luminous string writing is, throughout the work, very moving.

The first movement begins with an introduction with chiming celesta over string and wind (including cup-muted trumpets) presenting a pentatonic melody (pastoral in mood) leading to the woodwind introducing the main theme, which grows out of the introduction almost imperceptibly. Throughout the symphony at climactic moments, Still uses the brass to punctuate in the "call and response" fashion of the African-American church and the Negro spiritual. The movement builds to a proud, determined ending in the minor. The second movement's main theme is distinctive and memorable as it glides up the G major scale to the leading tone (F#) with an air of nostalgia. In his orchestration in general, Still prefers to use the orchestral choirs (strings, woodwinds, brass, percussion) in alternation, much like his contemporary Roy Harris. So when solo instruments (oboe and violin) are used here, the effect is all the more telling. The middle section is much faster and animated before the main theme returns in all its lushness in the original tempo. Sudden rapid music interrupts a potential soft resolution of this movement, leading without a break into the third movement. This scherzo in cakewalk rhythm employs the "Scottish snap" rhythm which becomes a jazzy "doo-wa" inflection later when developed. The strutting, energetic rhythm reflects Still's great skill in writing balletic music. Muted trumpets anticipate the main theme of the finale before the English horn introduces it in full. The music builds

to an impressive, decisive peroration in g minor. The deep, non-aggressive but assertive, relentless drive throughout this movement (and much of Still's music) may perhaps be a musical metaphor of the slow but inexorably steady progress of all Americans (but especially African-Americans) toward true racial freedom and equality.

The *Symphony No. 3 'The Sunday Symphony'* is the only one of the five Still symphonies never performed in his lifetime. It was premiered by Carlton Woods and the North Arkansas Symphony on February 12, 1984 and is dedicated to Still's fellow composer and friend Christian Dupriez. This symphony was written to replace the original *Symphony No. 3* which was revised in 1958 as the *Symphony No. 5 'Western Hemisphere'*.

The *Third Symphony* expresses the spiritual "day in the life" of a devout worshipper. Each movement has a descriptive title. The first movement, *Awakening* (Moderately fast), begins with a bold proclamation or call to order in the brass leading to the main body of the movement, in which short motives are actively developed throughout the orchestra with percussion punctuation in "call and response" fashion. Especially colorful woodwind writing enhances and offsets the forceful pentatonic themes. Movement II, *Prayer* (Very slow): Like a minister's "call to prayer", the English horn intones the mournful theme reminiscent of Negro "spirituals" as the flute responds. Lowered "blues" thirds and sevenths in the melody and harmony reveal the connective influences between "sacred" and "secular" in African-American music. Movement III, *Relaxation* (Gaily): This delicate and playful scherzo makes use of rapid staccato "chattering" in the winds deftly enhanced by a prominent tambourine (a common instrument in the African-American church used here much more delicately by Still). Some of the modal brass harmonies in the center of the movement even reflect back to Monteverdi's *Orfeo* before returning to the present. Movement IV, *Day's End and a New Beginning* (Resolutely): The introduction sternly moves forward with repeated notes, then strings provide the principal lyrical theme with oboe accompaniment. Solo

horn interjects motives of the introduction like an encouraging congregation. When the introductory theme returns in full force, it inexorably progresses to an affirmative, decisive ending in the minor.

Leopold Stokowski called William Grant Still “one of our greatest American composers”. As more of Still’s

works are recorded and performed, it has naturally led to a reevaluation and rehabilitation of William Grant Still and his body of work that bodes well for his greater appreciation now and in the near future.

David Ciucevich, Jr.

Fort Smith Symphony

Photo: Steven Jones



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!TM” multi-media concerts for school children.

FIRST VIOLIN

Elizabeth Lyon,
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 Lori Fay,
 Associate Concertmaster
 Karen Jeter,
 Associate Concertmaster
 Carol Harrison,
 Assistant Concertmaster
 Er-Gene Kahng,
 Assistant Concertmaster
 Densi Rushing
 Arthur Busby
 Christy Paxton-Tureman
 Mike Burkepile
 Marat Gabdullin
 Martin Dalton
 Steven Hughes, II
 Carla Geter
 Nan Lu
 Angelika Pereira
 Greta Lane

SECOND VIOLIN

Ty Myers, Principal
 Betty Anne Gottlieb,
 Assistant Principal
 Natasha N. Nottoli
 Justin Pourtorkan
 Nicole Melki
 Diane Halliburton
 Martha Cox
 Melody Garrett
 Alina Debbaut
 Oksana Pavilionis
 Jeanne Kierre
 Erica Mueller
 Machelles Ward
 Linda D. Hills

VIOLA

Darrel Barnes, Principal
 Anitra Fay,
 Assistant Principal
 Jesse Collett
 Kathy Murray
 Sara Morrow
 Elizabeth Meisinger
 Mary Ann Saylor
 Christy Genn
 Curtis Hansen
 Viktoria L. Matheson
 Charlotte Scott
 Colin Waddell

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 Barbara Godette,
 Assistant Principal
 James Robert Bradshaw
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 Angelika Machnik-Jones
 Brady Lanier
 Alejandro Acosta
 James T. Rollins
 Kevin Johnson
 Craig Leffer
 Josh Klossner
 Jayne Burdick
 Jason Jupiterwala
 Jill Morgan

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 John Schimek
 Mark Phillips
 Cody Sisk
 Greg Moore
 John Widder
 Brandon Patterson
 Clinton Trench
 Yuichi Miyazaki

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Elizabeth Shuhan, Principal
 Emmaline Smyth
 Julie Konzelman

OBOE

Theresa Delaplain, Principal
 Suzanne McGowen
 Bo Newsome

ENGLISH HORN

Suzanne McGowen,
 Principal

CLARINET

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 Randy Harper
 Angela Carter

BASS CLARINET

Kristi Sturgeon, Principal

BASSOON

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 Lia Southern

HORN

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 Richard Ruhe
 Jack Jackson II
 Jane Waters-Showalter

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 Randy Graham
 Penny Schimek

TROMBONE

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 Vernon Howard

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TIMPANI

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David Ewing, Principal
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Robert Mueller, Principal

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Becky Yates

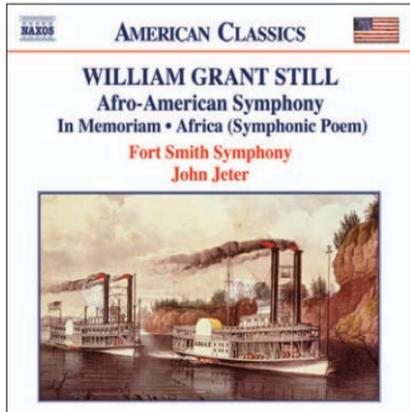
John Jeter



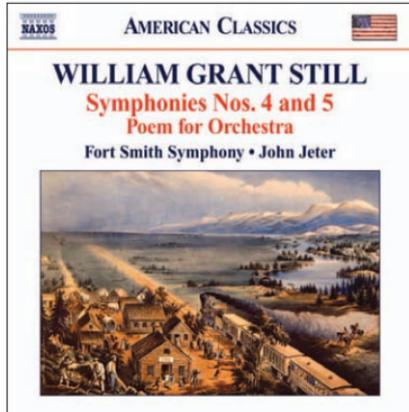
Photo: Steven Jones

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 Hartt School of Music and Butler University’s Jordan College of Fine Arts.

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William Grant
STILL
(1895-1978)

Wood Notes (1947)*

- | | | |
|----------|---|-------------|
| 1 | I. Singing River (Moderately slow) | 6:46 |
| 2 | II. Autumn Night (Lightly) | 2:49 |
| 3 | III. Moon Dusk (Slowly and expressively) | 4:27 |
| 4 | IV. Whippoorwill's Shoes (Humorously) | 2:30 |

**Symphony No. 2 in G minor
'Song of a New Race' (1937) 27:05**

- | | | |
|----------|-----------------------------|-------------|
| 5 | I. Slowly | 8:56 |
| 6 | II. Slowly | 7:19 |
| 7 | III. Moderately fast | 3:37 |
| 8 | IV. Moderately slow | 7:13 |

**Symphony No. 3
'The Sunday Symphony' (1958) 18:01**

- | | | |
|-----------|---|-------------|
| 9 | I. Awakening (Moderately fast) | 3:48 |
| 10 | II. Prayer (Very slow) | 6:34 |
| 11 | III. Relaxation (Gaily) | 2:30 |
| 12 | IV. Day's End and a New Beginning (Resolutely) | 5:09 |

***WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING**

Fort Smith Symphony • John Jeter

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AMERICAN CLASSICS

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 rose from humble beginnings to work as an arranger while studying composition with Chadwick and Varèse. Still embraced the blues, spirituals, jazz, and other ethnic American musics within classical forms. *Wood Notes* musically depicts Still's love of nature. *Symphony No. 2*, the last of a trilogy of works depicting the African-American experience, presents the vision of an integrated American society, while *Symphony No. 3* describes a spiritual 'day in the life' of a devout worshipper. This disc completes the Naxos cycle of William Grant Still's Symphonies.

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