

Works by WILLIAM GRANT STILL VIDEMUS

New World Records 80399

William Grant Still (1895-1978) has often been termed the patriarchal figure in Black music and was the first Afro-American composer to secure extensive publication and significant performances. His works represent the culmination of musical aspirations of the Harlem Renaissance, in that they “elevated” folkloric materials. Such a concept, however, had been employed occasionally by earlier figures, including Harry T. Burleigh (1868-1949), Clarence Cameron White (1880-1960), R. Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943, New World NW 367), and Still’s Afro-British model and cultural hero, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912).

Still was born in Woodville, Mississippi, and his early days were spent in Little Rock, Arkansas, where his mother moved after his father’s early death. His stepfather was a record collector, and those early opera discs and Still’s violin studies stimulated the youth’s interest in music.

On graduation from high school, Still planned to study for a medical career, but his love of music was intensified at Wilberforce College in Ohio, and especially at Oberlin, where he heard a full orchestra for the first time.

During this period, he worked in Memphis for W.C. Handy, subsequently joining him when Handy moved to New York City. In 1921 Hall Johnson recommended him as oboist for Ebie Blake’s *Shuffle Along* (NW 260) and, while touring in Boston with the show, Still secured composition lessons from George Whitfield Chadwick. After his return to New York, he studied with Edgard Varèse, although any avant-garde influence from this composer remains lost in Still’s earlier, withdrawn works. He concentrated instead on the ethnic latitude more readily allowed by a neoromantic (and sometimes) neo-impressionistic approach.

Late in the 1920s, Still began to receive grants and awards, and these, combined with income from jazz arrangements written for Artie Shaw and others, enabled him to move to California. There, although only minimally active in writing for films (and later, television), he soon formulated an influential orchestral palette.

The *Suite for Violin and Piano* (1943) demonstrates Still’s attempts at approximating indigenous African music, as he had earlier with his choral ballet, *Sabji* (1931). Musical materials were not available to him, as little scholarly attention had been given to that area of ethnomusicology during the 1930s. He had to settle on modal inventions, which, if not authentic, at least gave the flavor of the idiom he desired.

Still sought further inspiration for his work from visual artists. The first movement, drawing from Richmond Barthe’s “African Dancer,” utilizes a three-measure phrase structure in the opening theme and a contrasting bluesy middle section. The second movement relates to Sargent Johnson’s lithograph, “Mother and Child,” and is an ardent and lyric essay in ternary design. The finale portrays the impish and sometime sassy humor Still exhibited in “Li’l Scamp” (in *From the Black Belt*, 1925) and “Quit Dat Fool’nish” (1938). Its stimulus is “Gamin,” a bronze sculpture by Augusta Savage (the cover art of this recording). The suite was dedicated to Louis and Annette Kaufman, who presented the premiere in Boston’s Jordan Hall on March 12, 1944.

Songs of Separation is a cycle of five thematically related songs set in 1949 to texts of Black poets: “Idolatry,” by Arna Bontemps; “Poème,” by Philippe Thoby-Marcelin; “Parted,” by Paul Laurence Dunbar; “If You Should Go,” by Countee Cullen; and “A Black Pierrot,” by Langston Hughes. The ardor and, in the Dunbar instance, humor, are reminiscent of the songs of Coleridge-Taylor.

Incantation and Dance (1942) is Still’s only work for oboe, here recorded on flute and piano. (Still’s works were often performed with different instrumentation.) The Dorian material for the incantation emanates from the opening piano figure, and is followed without pause by the pentatonic dance, whose finale is restated an octave higher in this version.

Less familiar are Still’s settings of spirituals, such as the set of twelve published in 1937 by the Handy Brothers, and “*Here’s One*” (1941), whose tune and text are better known by the opening line, “Talk about a child that do love Jesus.” The latter exists in versions for solo voice, or violin with piano or chamber ensemble.

“Summerland” was originally the second of *Three Visions* (1936) for piano, but was recast by the composer for different instrumentation. Lazy and relaxed, it evokes a quiet, warm afternoon.

The text of *Citadel* (1956) by Virginia Brasier-Perlee inspires the composer’s impressionistic harmonies and overt romanticism.

Song for the Lonely (1953) sets a poem by Verna Arvey, the composer’s wife, who served as his pianist, librettist, poet, and creator of his ballet scenarios. She was a journalist in her own right as well.

Another of the composer’s arrangements is *Out of Silence*, originally the fourth movement of *Seven Traceries* for piano (1940). The mysterious outer sections of this movement exhibit Still’s less tonal language, contrasting strongly with the harmonic lushness of the middle section.

Ennanga (1956) is one of several works which exhibit Still’s pride in his African heritage (other compositions pay tribute to his Spanish and Native American forebears) and, although he lacked information about African music, he was aware that an ennanga is an African harp. The first two movements are harmonically and structurally akin to his *African-American Symphony* from a quarter of a century earlier (without the blues element) while the dance-like third movement provides the energetic conclusion.

“Lift Every Voice and Sing” was composed as a patriotic song for a Lincoln commemoration in 1899 by J. Rosamond Johnson (1873-1954), based on a text by his brother, James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938). It was quickly accepted as an anthem by Afro-Americans and has been arranged by many composers, although this setting by Still is not widely known.

—Dominique-René de Lerma

Dominique-René de Lerma is a member of the administration staff of the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College in Chicago.

Permission to reprint some of the texts in this recording was not available.

Idolatry (Arna Bontemps)

You have been good to me, I give you this:
The arms of lovers empty as our own,
Marble lips sustaining one long kiss,
And the hard sound of hammers breaking
stone.

For I will build a chapel in the place where our
love died.

And I will journey there to make a sign and
kneel before your face,

And set an old bell tolling on the air.

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Parted (Paul Laurence Dunbar)

She wrapped her soul in a lace of lies,
With a prime deceit to pin it;
And I thought I was gaining a fearsome prize,
So I staked my soul to win it.
We wed and parted on her complaint,
And both were a bit of barter,
Tho' I'll confess that I'm no saint,
I'll swear that she's no martyr.

A Black Pierrot (Langston Hughes)

I am a black Pierrot:
She did not love me,
So I crept away into the night and the night
was black, too.

I am a black Pierrot:
She did not love me,
So I wept until the red dawn dripped blood
over the eastern hills.

And my heart was bleeding too.

I am a black Pierrot:
She did not love me,
So with my once gay colored soul shrunken
like a balloon without air,
I went forth in the morning to seek a new
brown love.

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Here's One (spiritual arr. W.G. Still)

Talk about a child dat do love Jesus,

Here's one, here's one.
Talk about a child dat do love Jesus,
Here's one, here's one.
In ol' Satan's snares I once was fallin'
But I heard the voice of my Lawd callin'
Talk about a child dat do love Jesus,
Here's one.

Talk about a child dat's been converted,
Here's one, here's one.
Talk about a child dat's been converted,
Here's one, here's one.
Evah since I learned de gospel story
I've been walking up de path to glory,
Talk about a child dat's been converted,
Here's one.

Citadel (Virginia Brasier)

Love can lace leaves together
And make them proof against the world,
Or strengthen whatever insubstantial roof
houses a family.
Sometimes at night all mothers waken
And with the littlest light, and greatest quiet,
Tour the rooms to see that all sleep, covered
well, and peacefully;
To chase out dreams and let in more fresh air,
And just be glad that each is sleeping there.
Love can lace even leaves
And make them proof against peril,
Or strengthen whatever insubstantial roof.

From "The Reflective Rib," © 1955. Reprinted by permission of Virginia Brasier.

Song for the Lonely (Verna Arvey)

Raindrops, soft from the mist,
Disturb the stillness of my thoughts.
Raindrops, soft from the mist, beat down.
No birdnote breaks the all pervading hush,
No ray of moonlight cuts the darkness.
No footstep comes along the graveled
pathway,
Nor the sound of a stone displaced.

Soft raindrops, fresh from the mist,
Dull the pain of loneliness.
Soft raindrops, fresh from the mist,
beat down.

Raindrops, unceasing:
They bring again the breath of a presence.
Raindrops, insistent:
They bring again a long lost dream.
Raindrops, unending:
They fall into my soul, into my heart,
And mingle with my tears.
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Lift Every Voice and Sing (James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, arr. W.G. Still)
Lift every voice and sing, till earth and
 heaven ring
Ring with the harmonies of liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise, high as the
 listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past
 has taught us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

God of our weary years, God of our
 silent tears,
Thou who has brought us thus far on the
 way;
Thou who hast by thy might led us into
 the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God,
 where we meet Thee,
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the
 world, we forget Thee;
Shadowed beneath Thy hand, may we
 forever stand,
True to our God, true to our native land.
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SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

The Bells. Kaintuck'. Quit Dat Fool'nish. Three Visions. Richard Felds, piano. Orion ORS 82442, 1982.
Carmela; Here's one; Blues from Lenox Avenue; Pastorella; Suite for Violin and Piano; Summerland from *Three Visions.* Louis Kaufman, violin; Annette Kaufman, piano. Orion ORS 7152, 1971.
Danzas de Panamá; Ennanga; A Song for the Lonely; Songs of Separation. Claudine Carlson, mezzo-soprano; Lois Adele Craft, harp; string ensemble. Orion ORS 7278, 1972.

Darker America; From the Black Belt. Music for Westchester Symphony Orchestra, Siegfried Landau conducting. Turnabout TVS 34546, 1974.

Festive Overture. Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Arthur Bennett Lipkin conducting. CRI SD 259, 1970.

Grief. Susan Matthews, mezzo-soprano, with piano. University of Michigan SM 0015, 1980.

Highway 1 U.S.A.: What Does He Know of Dreams? And You're Wonderful, Mary; Afro-American Symphony. William Brown, tenor; London Symphony Orchestra, Paul Freeman conducting. Columbia/College Music Society M 32792, 1974.

Miniatures. Gretel Shanely, flute; Peter Christ, oboe; Sharon Davis, piano. Crystal S 321, 1979.

Sahdji. Morgan State University Choir; London Symphony Orchestra, Paul Freeman conducting. Columbia/College Music Society M 33433, 1975.

Seven Traceries. Francis Walker, piano. Orion ORS 78305/306. 1978.

Songs of Separation. Cynthia Bedford, mezzo-soprano; Oakland Youth Orchestra, Robert Hughes conducting. Desto DC 7102, ca. 1971.

Three Visions. Felipe Hall, piano. Da Camera Magna SM 93144, 1975.

Three Visions. Natalis Hinderas, piano. Desto DC 7102-3, ca. 1971.

Victory Tide. Morgan State University Choir, Nathan Carter conducting. Sable Records KM 2272, 1978.

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This recording was made at the African Meeting House on Boston's Smith Court on Beacon Hill, dedicated in 1806 as a school, church, and community hall, and currently part of the Museum of Afro-American History. The African Meeting House is the oldest surviving Afro-American Church building. From its earliest days, music was an integral part of the religious and secular life of this building, which stood literally and symbolically at the heart of Boston's Afro-American community.

VIDEMUS, established in 1986, is a Boston-based chamber music organization whose purpose is to promote the music of minority and women composers. Since its inception, Videmus has produced several major works, including the 1988 Boston premiere of XCERPTS, a concert version of the opera *Malcolm X* by Anthony Davis, and the T.J. Anderson 60th Birthday Celebration Concert at Sanders Theatre.

Featured Performers on this recording include Videmus founder and artistic director, pianist **Vivian Taylor**. Ms. Taylor has been active as an advocate of the music of minorities and women since 1975. As a soloist, she has presented numerous premieres in the U.S., Switzerland, and Korea. Award winning violinist **Lynn Chang** has performed extensively as a chamber musician and soloist with orchestras in the U.S., Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Baritone **Robert Honeysucker** has appeared in operatic roles, ensembles, and solo performances in Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, and the Middle East, in addition to U.S. performances with conductors Michael Tilson Thomas, Peter Sellars, and Sarah Caldwell. **Ann Hobson Pilot**, principal harpist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, has appeared as guest soloist with several American orchestras, and the St. Trinity Orchestra of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. An enthusiastic performer of chamber music, she has participated in the Marlboro Music Festival in Vermont, founded the New England Harp Trio, and is a member of Collage, a contemporary music ensemble. Flutist **Jean DeMart** was first prize winner of the 1989 National Association for Composers of the U.S.A. Performer's Competition in Los Angeles. She has appeared as soloist and chamber musician in Switzerland and at the Gadeamus International Music Festival in Holland.

Producer: Mark DeVoto

Engineer: Tom Clark, Location Recordings

Consulting engineer: John Newton, Soundmirror, Inc.

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Suite for Violin and Piano

1. I. (4:32)
2. II. (6:53)
3. III. (2:07)

Songs of Separation

4. Idolatry (1:57)
5. Poème (1:12)
6. Parted (0:44)
7. If You Should Go (1:18)
8. A Black Pierrot (2:26)
9. *Incantation and Dance* (4:56)
10. *Here's One* (3:28)
11. *Summerland* (4:19)
12. *Citadel* (2:33)
13. *Song For the Lonely* (3:44)
14. *Out of the Silence* (4:50)

Ennanga

15. I. (5:34)
16. II. (5:14)
17. III. (4:33)
18. *Lift Every Voice and Sing* (3:02)

VIDEMUS: Robert Honeysucker, baritone; Ann Hobson Pilot, harp; Jean DeMart, flute; Lynn Chang, solo violin; Lydia Forbes, violin; George Taylor, viola; Mark Churchill, cello; Prentice Pilot, double bass; Vivian Taylor, piano.

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