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William Grant Still. By Catherine Parsons Smith. American Composers Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

William Grant Still (1895–1978) opened many doors for African American composers during the first half of the twentieth century in popular music, film, and concert music. Despite his celebrity as the first black composer to incorporate the blues successfully in a symphony, Still's inclusion in the canon of American concert music did not come until the end of the last century, prompted in large part by demands within the academy for better representation of minority and women composers in the literature. The centennial of his birth in 1995 generated renewed interest in his work, spawning performances of Still's music across the United States and a flurry of scholarly inquiry into his life and career.

Along with efforts to preserve Still's music and personal papers, as well as pioneering biographical, bibliographical, and interpretive scholarship published over the last decade by Catherine Smith, Gayle Murchison, Wayne Shirley, and Carol Oja,¹ a major obstacle in writing a comprehensive study of the composer's life has been the paucity of primary sources from the 1910s and early 1920s (Still's formative years) and the volatile decades of the 1950s and 1960s, when, problematically, the voice of his second wife, Verna Arvey, became almost indistinguishable from Still's.²

Catherine Parsons Smith (1933–2009) addresses these lacunae in her introduction to the life of William Grant Still. In this compact book, she brilliantly reconstructs the composer's life based upon primary sources and produces a work that should serve as a standard reference on Still for years to come. Building on her investigation into race and gender in the music of the United States in her study of musical life in Los Angeles,³ her biography of composer Mary Carr Moore,⁴ her essays on Still published in the journal *American Music*,⁵ and her book *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions*, Smith skillfully places Still, the composer-musician, within the context of U.S. life during the first half of the twentieth century as an African American male, probing and asking relevant questions that occasionally

¹ Catherine Parsons Smith, *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), with contributions by Gayle Murchison and Wayne Shirley; Gayle Murchison, "'Dean of Afro-American Composers' or 'Harlem Renaissance Man': 'The New Negro' and the Musical Poetics of William Grant Still," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 53/1 (Spring 1994): 42–74; Murchison, "Current Research Twelve Years after the William Grant Still Centennial," *Black Music Research Journal* 25/1–2 (Spring-Fall 2005): 119–54; Wayne D. Shirley, "William Grant Still's Choral Ballad *And They Lynched Him on a Tree*," *American Music* 12/4 (Winter 1994): 425–61; and Carol J. Oja, *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

² Murchison, "Current Research," 123, 131.

³ Catherine Parsons Smith, *Making Music in Los Angeles: Transforming the Popular* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

⁴ Catherine Parsons Smith and Cynthia S. Richardson, *Mary Carr Moore: American Composer* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987).

⁵ Catherine Parsons Smith, "William Grant Still in Ohio (1911–1919)," *American Music* 22/2 (Summer 2004): 203–30; Smith, "'Harlem Renaissance Man' Revisited: The Politics of Race and Class in William Grant Still's Late Career," *American Music* 15/3 (Autumn 1997): 381–406.

challenge Still family lore, which had helped shape much of the composer's legacy up until the publication of Smith's latest biography.

William Grant Still covers several broad topics: the composer's ancestry and childhood in Arkansas; his school years and apprenticeship in Ohio (1911–19); his experience at Wilberforce University, where he met and married his first wife, Grace Bundy, and later at the Oberlin College Conservatory; the New York years (1920–26, 1930–32), where he was exposed to modernist composers and contemporary movers in the concert world; and the Los Angeles years (1926–29, 1934–ca. 1950), when he worked as an arranger-composer of popular music, film, and concert music, divorced Bundy, and entered into a mixed-race marriage with Verna Arvey.

Smith unveils considerable new information in this biography. For instance, she provides solid documentation tracing Still's determined drive to acquire formal music training, hone his skills as a performer, and gain familiarity with vernacular and classical music repertory, despite objections from his strong-willed mother. Most interestingly, Smith reproduces excerpts from Still's first published composition, a rag entitled "No Matter What You Do," issued in 1916 by Handy and Pace, when Still worked briefly as an arranger in Memphis for W. C. Handy (20). Ironically, Arvey's 1939 Still biography makes no mention of his work with Handy, although Still would later state: "I didn't come in contact with Negro music until I had become of age and had entered professional work. I had to go out and learn it" (21).

The early 1920s found Still actively working as a performer-arranger of popular music in New York City. This period also marked his earliest professional forays into the classical music world, first through his association with Edgard Varèse, who briefly gave Still lessons in avant-garde compositional techniques and facilitated performances of his music at Aeolian Hall by the International Composers Guild, and secondly through his introduction to conductors Howard Hanson, Eugene Goossens, and Leopold Stokowski, who would later program and champion his music. According to Smith, "Still's period of study with Varèse was a major breakthrough, into a different world from that of nightclubs, pit orchestras, and commercial arranging. It started him, at least tentatively, on his career as a concert composer" (34), even though Still would quickly abandon modernism in favor of a more conservative compositional style compatible with writing racially identifiable concert music that conformed to a philosophy shared by composers of the Harlem Renaissance. Smith observes that although Still's initial entrée to composition began in the world of popular music, he reluctantly spoke in later years about his activities as an arranger and orchestrator for Broadway, radio, and jazz bands, choosing to focus instead on his concert music—perhaps reflecting the public's perception by mid-century of a growing divide between commercial music and art music.

Smith's foray into the controversial history of the 1949 New York City Opera production of Still's *Troubled Island* initiated an almost decade-long war of words with Judith Anne Still, the composer's daughter, who steadfastly upheld the Still family's conspiracy theory that leftist New York critics deliberately panned this opera because of racism.⁶ Still's *Troubled Island* (based on a libretto by Langston

⁶ Smith, "Harlem Renaissance Man' Revisited."

Hughes and Verna Arvey, and set in Haiti during the Revolution of 1791) became the first opera written by a U.S.-born black composer to be performed by a major opera company in the United States. The New York City Opera scheduled three performances. The third and final performance (conducted by a youthful Julius Rudel) drew a small audience; no further performances were given. According to family lore, communist and racially inspired critics plotted against Still, and this cabal led to poor reviews of *Troubled Island*, which accounted for no further performances of the work (76).

Smith critically examines this “plot theory” within the tone and tenor of mid-twentieth-century U.S. life and concludes that *Troubled Island’s* reception in New York did not result from a plot, but rather reflected the lukewarm reception most new operas historically encountered in the city during the last century. She further investigates the genesis of the *Troubled Island* conspiracy theory, tracing it back to Still’s Los Angeles years after he married Arvey and became politically active in the anticommunist movement. Removed from New York City, he began to associate “communism with the modernists’ dissonant techniques he had abandoned some years earlier” on the East Coast (82). As the United States emerged from World War II and entered the Cold War, Still began to experience a decline in performances of his symphonic music, which he had come to rely on for income. It was then that he began to relate communist-inspired conspiracies aimed at controlling the movie and recording industries to alleged conspiracies preventing his music from being heard and his inability to obtain commissions. Smith maintains that one could identify a much more direct explanation for Still’s problems during this period—“one that he found very difficult to face . . . , institutionally grounded racism that pervaded American society and permeated individual attitudes” (82). Ultimately, further research, time, and distance from this controversy should settle whose interpretation of the *Troubled Island* saga is correct.

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