

William Grant Still (1895-1978)

Long known as the "Dean of American Negro Composers," as well as one of America's foremost composers, William Grant Still had the distinction of becoming a legend in his own lifetime. He attended Wilberforce University, where he took courses leading to a B.S. degree, but spent most of his time conducting the band, learning to play the various instruments involved and making his initial attempts to compose and to orchestrate. His subsequent studies at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music were financed at first by a legacy from his father, and later by a scholarship established just for him by the faculty.



At the end of his college years, he entered the world of commercial (popular) music, playing in orchestras and orchestrating, working in particular with the violin, cello and oboe. His employers included W. C. Handy, Don Voorhees, Sophie Tucker, Paul Whiteman, Willard Robison and Artie Shaw, and for several years he arranged and conducted the Deep River Hour over CBS and WOR. While in Boston playing oboe in the Shuffle

William Grant Still was a true pioneer, evidenced by his many firsts in the musical realm: the first black in the United States to have a symphony performed by a major symphony orchestra, the first to conduct a major symphony orchestra in the United States, the first to conduct a major symphony orchestra in the Deep South (1955), the first to conduct a white radio orchestra in New York City, the first to have an opera produced by a major company in the United States, and the first to have an opera televised over a national network. With these firsts, Still was a pioneer, but, in a larger sense, he pioneered because he was able to create music capable of interesting the greatest conductors of the day: truly serious music, but with a definite American flavor.

Still wrote over 150 compositions, including operas, ballets, symphonies, chamber works, and arrangements of folk themes, especially Negro spirituals, plus instrumental, choral and solo vocal works.