

# Composer, Pianist and Educator George Walker

# A SNAPSHOT



By Gregory Walker

To many, the Walker family needs no introduction. This musical dynasty boasts generations of world class musicians with significant contributions to the scholarship, composition and performance in our field. Gregory Walker's mother, music historian Helen Walker-Hill, wrote one of the pioneer publications honoring the works of Black women composers. His father George Walker (1922–2018), a Pulitzer Prize-winning composer, wrote widely performed works for orchestra, voice, piano and chamber ensembles. Gregory is a renowned violinist and composer. Grayson Walker, Gregory's son, is a hip-hop artist expanding the genre to symphonic halls. During the 2022 MTNA National Conference, George Walker will receive the MTNA Achievement Award—the highest award given by the association. Gregory Walker, his wife Lori Walker and I will perform violin sonatas by father and son during a special concert Tuesday, March 29 at 6:00 P.M. Post-concert, attendees will have the opportunity for Q & A with Gregory Walker. It is a privilege to honor this important family in our musical canon.

—Artina McCain, DMA

**T**ennis backhand sermons on the court...or at the kitchen table...or during TV commercials. My little brother and I fidgeting in front of each Christmas tree as he fiddled with his light meter and the same fancy Hasselblad camera astronauts took to the moon. Withering critiques of your favorite musicians, though a little hard to hear over the music from his floor-to-ceiling living room speakers. For our father, it was all about purity of form and crystal clarity. And sometimes it did get loud.

Family snapshots might not convey the gravitas of a now historical figure whose *Lyric for Strings* became one of the most widely performed American orchestral works of the 20th century and whose Pulitzer Prize-winning *Lilacs for Voice and Orchestra* has made him an inspirational African-American icon. But for anybody interested in George Walker, sometimes it's the little things.

George Theophilus Walker was born June 27, 1922, in Washington, D.C., the son of a Jamaican immigrant, the grandson of slaves. His mother arranged for him to start piano lessons along with the other neighborhood kids when he was five years



old. One day as he practiced, a white woman rang their doorbell and asked who was playing. When his mother told her, she excitedly repeated, "I've got to have him! I've got to have him!" But she was not a piano teacher.

He entered Oberlin Conservatory at age 14 with an organ minor, and he played on the tennis team. He took his first composition class with Normand Lockwood and later wrote, "The grade that I received at the end of the semester indicated that he was not overly impressed by my ability." My father did derive a grim satisfaction 40 years later when he was paired with Lockwood for a CRI record album. Graduating with honors in 1941, he then enrolled at the Curtis Institute of Music and studied with Rudolph Serkin. Listening to the fourth Chopin *Ballade* at a lesson, Serkin told him, "At your best, you are the equal of any pianist." In 2000, they both would be inducted into the American Classical Music Hall of Fame.

Immediately after making his Town Hall debut in 1945, he played the Rachmaninoff

Piano Concerto No. 3 with the Philadelphia Orchestra. But successes were already bitter-sweet: A number of managements were stringing him along and a representative at National Concert Artists told him it would be difficult to "sell a Black classical pianist."

"I had encountered a pressure-resistant wall," my father wrote. "All that I had done to prepare myself for a concert career was of no avail."

He sailed to France on the Queen Elizabeth for studies at Fountainebleau School with Nadia Boulanger. The teacher of Aaron Copland, Phillip Glass and even Quincy Jones, Boulanger had already been linked to a who's who of American masters. At their first lesson, he showed her one of his songs. She said, "This is a masterpiece. You are a composer. Don't you mean an F-sharp here?"

With more than 90 published works, including piano and string sonatas, choral pieces, concertos and orchestral sinfonias, George Walker's contributions were finally acknowledged with Guggenheim and NEA awards, seven honorary doctoral degrees and the ASCAP Aaron Copland Award. He taught at Smith College, the University of Colorado, the University of Delaware and was appointed chair of the Rutgers University Newark music department. In Washington D.C., June 27th, his birthday, is recognized and remembered as George Walker Day.

As for my brother and I, we remember those early mornings, his voice describing a backhand's graceful path and the expansion of the chest with the follow-through, over and over again, before the balls ever came out of the can.

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**Gregory T.S. Walker, DMA**, is professor at the University of Colorado Denver. An American Academy of Arts and Letters Fellowship-winning composer, he is artistic director of the Colorado NeXt Music Fest and former concertmaster of the Boulder Philharmonic Orchestra.

