



The Pedagogical Piano Works of William Grant Still

By Kindal Gammill, Desmond Henderson and Nathan Shelton

Generally regarded as the “Dean of African American Composers,” William Grant Still (1895–1978) was the first composer to bring African American music idioms like jazz and blues into the concert hall. His accomplishments include being the first African American composer to have his work, *Afro-*

American Symphony, performed by a symphony orchestra; the first African American composer to conduct a major American orchestra, conduct on national radio and conduct a symphony orchestra in the Deep South; and the first African American composer to arrange a piece of music for a national radio program. In all, he composed more than 200 pieces for chamber ensembles, orchestra, opera, ballet, band and brass ensemble, chorus and piano. Our poster presentation explores piano works for elementary, intermediate and early-advanced pianists composed by William Grant Still during the first half of the 20th century. Information related to his piano works includes distinguishable characteristics of each piece, the influence of gospel, jazz and popular music on his compositional style as well as the musical inspiration and social contexts that influenced his compositional output. Excerpts from his compositions *Five Animal Sketches*, *Seven Traceries*, *A Deserted Plantation* and *Dance* are shared as examples of his compositional voice.

Still’s vast influence as a composer crosses genres. During his career he orchestrated and arranged for W. C. Handy, Paul Whiteman, Sophie Tucker, Artie Shaw and Willard Robison, studied with George Chadwick and Edgard Varèse and influenced the style of composers like George Gershwin. Though overlooked for much of the late 20th century, his compositions have deservedly garnered new attention in recent years. It is imperative that we highlight his many accomplishments and explore his distinctly American sound to show the many ways he has helped to shape popular and western art music of the 20th century. ◀◀

Kindal Gammill is an undergraduate student at Mississippi State University pursuing a bachelor of music degree with a concentration in piano. He currently teaches piano and music theory through MSU’s Community Music School.



Desmond Henderson is an undergraduate student at Mississippi State University pursuing a bachelor of music education degree with concentrations in piano and voice. He has presented research on underrepresented composers at several local, regional and national conferences.



Nathan Shelton is pursuing a bachelor of arts in music with a piano concentration at Mississippi State University. At MSU, he is treasurer of the MTNA Collegiate Chapter, a collaborative pianist and choir member.



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The Composer



- William Grant Still (1895–1978) was born into a musical household in Woodville, MS. Soon after he moved to Little Rock, Arkansas and began studying the violin.
- As a young adult he studied theory and counterpoint at Oberlin Conservatory and composition with Edgard Varèse at the New England Conservatory.
- Still was both the first African American to conduct a major orchestra (Los Angeles Philharmonic in 1936) and to have his work (Afro American Symphony) performed by a philharmonic orchestra (Los Angeles Philharmonic in 1931).
- Known as the “Dean of African American Composers” for his role in garnering attention of African American music and composers.
- Throughout his career, he composed over 200 chamber, orchestral, opera, ballet, band and brass ensemble, choral, and piano works.

Compositional Traits

- Still utilized Blues-based harmonic progressions, melodic turns, rhythm, form, melodic gestures to challenge musical stereotypes and racial stereotypes of African American and European music techniques.
- His pedagogical works are influenced by childhood themes and his African American experience.
- Still favored a post-tonal sound, particularly in his early career.
- He was influenced by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor and Edgard Varèse and influenced composers like George Gershwin.

Elementary Level Works

Animal Sketches

Background: This set contains five short character pieces. Each work requires the performer to embody the movements of a different animal.

No. 1, “Camel”: Features a LH ostinato, ample two-note slurs, and practice in shaping short motivic ideas. ABA form and with accessible rhythms and some post-tonal harmonies.

No.2, “Bear”: Showcases a persistent LH melody that is reminiscent of a bear stomping through the woods. This nine-measure piece necessitates a musically mature student to convey its sophisticated nature.



No. 3, “Horse”: Depicts the galloping of a horse in a playful and lively full-sounding melody. Harmonically contrasts the atonal qualities of the other pieces in the set.

No. 4, “Elephant”: Features a LH ostinato and a RH rhythmically repetitive melody that includes some chromaticism. Some RH chords are reminiscent of an elephant “trumpeting”. Requires expressive playing.



No. 5, “Lamb”: This homophonic work includes parallel motion between the hands. Modal influences can be heard in this charming piece that is the most accessible in the set.

Intermediate Level Works

“Blues” from Lenox Avenue

Background: Lenox Avenue (1937) for orchestra, narrator, and singers is a set of ten orchestral episodes. In 1938, Still adapted this work into a ballet by the same name that was notated for piano. *Blues* is part of this ballet.

“Blues” from Lenox Avenue:

The piece transports the listener to an underground blues club. The melody creates an expression of emotions that would typically be conveyed through the vocalist, with imitation of the different blues instruments heard throughout the piece: saxophone, bass, and drums.



“Dance” from Deserted Plantation

Background: Deserted Plantation is a three-movement solo piano work. This work captures Still’s affinity for natural lyricism, melodic simplicity, and his ability to blend African American and European idioms.

“Dance” from Deserted Plantation

This jazzy piece features syncopation, is extremely articulated, and is tonal in nature. The middle section of the piece has strong blues influences. It is effective as a stand-alone piece or as a finale to the entire suite.



Early Advanced Level Works

Seven Traceries

Background: According to the preface of this collection, “each is based on the simplest of motifs, developed to the extent of its own possibilities. The individual titles for these compositions were suggested to the composer by the music--the music did not arise from the titles.” (Preface by Avery, 1940).

“Mystic Pool”: The opening of this work creates a “mystic” tone. This piece is tonal, uses intervals and chords that require a large hand span, features chromaticism, inner voice melodies, and ample sequences. A sophisticated work for the experienced student.



“Muted Laughter”: Features a repeated playful motif that utilizes both the right and left hand. The phrasing and voicing in this piece require a musically mature student to capture its comical character.

“A Bit of Wit”: This ethereal composition showcases a multitude of rhythmic sixteenth-note passages requiring hand independence and hand crossing.



References

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