

Eastman Philharmonia

~ PROGRAM ~
Eastman Philharmonia
Austin Chanu, *conductor*

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conductor

Wednesday, March 6, 2024
Kodak Hall at Eastman Theatre
7:30 PM

Threnody: In Memory of Jean Sibelius (1965)

William Grant Still
(1895-1978)
6'

Symphony No. 4 "Autochthonous" (1947)

Moderately
Slowly
With a graceful lilt
Slowly and reverently

William Grant Still
27'

~ INTERMISSION ~

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 43 (1902)

Allegretto
Andante; ma rubato
Vivacissimo
Finale: Allegro moderato

Jean Sibelius
(1865-1957)
43'



EASTMAN
SCHOOL OF MUSIC
UNIVERSITY of ROCHESTER

William Grant Still, (1895-1978) was a Black American composer who grew up during the beginning of the 20th century, whose output includes over 200 works, many missing, including nine operas, five symphonies, dozens of orchestral works, choral works, chamber, and even solo vocal. He found early success with his compositions such as *Afro American Symphony* which became the most performed American Symphony in the 1930s and 40s. Despite this initial popularity, his career and recognition faded, his race impeded opportunities, and his music and influence on the 20th century American style spent many decades being neglected in the orchestral world. Today, Still is still most known for the *Afro-American Symphony*, written in 1930, and is a symphony based on the Blues. Still is quoted as saying, “I resolved that someday I would try to elevate that musical form [Blues] to symphonic level, and that was the motivation for the Afro-American Symphony.” (Still, *Regarding your Trilogy*. Lecture) But what most don't know was that was just one period of his compositional output. Even just a few years later his compositional language was already drastically changing. The 1940s was Still's most productive decade as a composer, where he wrote an incredible amount of works including his fourth symphony. Still himself and scholars have divided his entire compositional career into 3 periods.

Period 1: Self Taught, Experimentation, and Studies (1916-mid 1920s)

William Grant Still was born on May 11, 1895 in Woodville Mississippi, grew up in Little Rock Arkansas, and died on December 3, 1978 in Los Angeles, California. Still dropped out of med school, moved to Ohio and began freelancing as a performer and composer. In 1916, Still was hired by the “Father of the Blues” W.C Handy to play cello and oboe in his band, as well as arrange and orchestrate. Still toured the south with Handy's band during this time. Still made the first band arrangements and orchestrations of Handy's famous tunes including “St. Louis Blues,” “Beale Street Blues” and “Hesitating Blues.” This was the beginning of the first of three periods in his compositional career.

In 1920, after a brief stint in the Navy, Still returned to work for Handy's publishing company, in Harlem, as an arranger, as well as freelancing on oboe, most notably playing in the pit for the Black musical “Shuffle Along.” Still followed the musical on tour to Boston, where he began studying composition with the noted American composer George Whitefield Chadwick at NEC. Chadwick was a pioneer whose music was a cross of German Romanticism and American idioms. Chadwick sharpened Still's self-critical faculties as well as pushed him to seek out “characteristic” American idioms in his music.

After returning to NYC, Still had the opportunity to study with noted French modernist composer Edward Varèse for 2.5 years - his longest stint

with any single teacher. During their studies, 1923-1925, Varèse pushed Still to experiment with form, harmony, and content, encouraging him to study works like Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. Varèse allowed for Still to feel free from the constraints of European musical tradition imparted on him by his previous teachers and thus led him into new paths of how to express his music. Varèse also provided Still with the first opportunities for his concert music to be performed through the International Composers Guild concerts at Aeolian Hall, where his music could be heard by some of the highest profile members of the “classical concert music” scene. At the premiere, 1925, of his first work, *From the Land of Dreams*, Still was panned by critics because his dissonant, modern style of music did not fit the white critic's view of what a Black man should be composing. A critic from the NYT is quoted as saying, “Is Mr. Still unaware that the cheapest melody in the revues he has orchestrated has more reality and inspiration in it than the curious noises he has manufactured.” (Smith, *William Grant Still*.) Still experimented with other works including *Levee Land* and *Journal of a Wanderer* but began questioning his long term aesthetic. Were modern techniques, gestural orchestrations, and overt dissonance the idiom that he identified with?

Period 2: Black Idiom/Racial Period (mid 1920s-early 1930s)

Still wrote, “...My thoughts began to dwell on myself in relation to my compositions. Was I really expressing myself when I wrote such bizarre, intellectual stuff? Was I giving the best that was in me?...I had been born into the Negro race, therefore (so I began to reason) my work on Earth must be bound up with my being a Negro...I decided to write racial music and to give Black titles to my compositions.” (Still, *My Life, My Words*.) Still was deeply affected by his time touring with W.C. Handy, and especially the racism, violence, and lynchings he witnessed. In his second period, he vowed to use his music to bring people together and elevate the Black experience and this period is marked by use of Blues, Black folk idioms, and rhythmic syncopation.

In his music, Still would, for the most part, avoid the polite “symphonic jazz” of those like Paul Whiteman and George Gershwin, Still also focused on composing his own Blues and spiritual themes and not just creating settings of well known spirituals. This was a subtle way for him to go against the notions of what a Black composer should be doing in the eyes of the critics. Speaking of his time touring the South with W.C. Handy, Still says “There I heard the Blues sung by the folksy people who had originated them, and I realized they were not the sensual expression that most people thought, but the yearnings of a lowly people for a better life. I resolved someday I would try to elevate that musical form to symphonic level,” which became the inspiration for his Afro-American Symphony, based on a Blues theme (Still, *Regarding your Trilogy*. Lecture) What emerged from this reflection was a reconciliation of his popular musical experiences with his early condition about contributing to the race, along with his religious convictions that he believed supported his mission.

Period 3: Universal Period(early 1930s - 1970s)

Early 1930s (1932-1933); Still began to feel the same way about only composing in an overtly racial idiom as he did about the atonal/dissonant idiom of his first period. He utilized any or all idioms which have seemed to suit the purpose of a particular composition. Still felt this method to be the answer to many problems arising among contemporary composers.

“Following this period (second), there came a time when I leaned toward a more universal idiom which, in my opinion, partook of all the others and became an expression of my own individuality as a composer. In other words, instead of limiting myself to one particular style, I wrote as I chose, using whatever idiom seemed appropriate to the subject at hand.” (Still, *My Arkansas Boyhood*.) This quote shows that Still believed that a composer should be a master of all different styles. During this third and final period, we can see Still’s compositional catalog as a wide array of styles and idioms. Still’s hopes of this “universal idiom” were to continue his promise to God of creating music that could unify and create interracial connection in America. Still’s goal was that of attempting to create a new direction or idea of what “American music” was while also raising the musical culture of Black Americans.

This nationalist concept in Still’s music began to be perceived in his compositions during the 1940s, at the height of World War II. Still, in correspondence with Alain Locke, the American writer and philosopher, wrote in 1941, “I hope and pray that we’ll come out of this thing purged, and that everyone will be made to realize the meaning of brotherhood... I get exceedingly angry over the backwardness of some of our people, but then I think that maybe it is all part of a Divine plan. You see, I think that God intends for America to produce a new race, one that will include all other races and lay undue emphasis on none. If we, as Negroes, were inclined to hang too closely together we might delay this ultimate amalgamation. I don’t feel that there is a future for the Negro Race as a race; only for America. We are standing on the brink of a momentous change.” (William Grant Still to Alain Locke, WGS Collection, Box 1.)

This quote solidifies Still’s ideological view of nationalist and universal goals and provides a window into how his music might emulate this view. As he composed more and more, Still began the process of creating a universal idiom in his music. We can see the combination of all of these influences in Still’s life projected into his composition. Blues from Handy, American serious music from Chadwick, musical theater/stage music from his pit orchestra and orchestrating shows, Varèse and abstract structure and dissonance, as well as Black folk music and his efforts to compose his own style of Black folk style music. The epitome of this American universal idiom comes to a head with Symphony no. 4 “Autochthonous.”

- Austin Chanu, 2024.

~ Artist Biography ~

A recipient of the 2023 Career Assistance Award from the Solti Foundation U.S., **Austin Chanu** is currently the Assistant Conductor of The Philadelphia Orchestra, where he assists Music Director Yannick Nézet-Séguin, as well as other guest conductors, and leads The Philadelphia Orchestra in select concerts.

Austin made his subscription debut with The Philadelphia Orchestra in April 2023 conducting Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*. Critics commended his interpretation saying, “the orchestra never sounded better as Chanu led with primal energy and shamanistic insight into the music...the orchestra matched Chanu’s confident leadership in a performance of searing energy and heart-thumping passion” (*Broad Street Review*).

Previously, Austin has appeared as a guest conductor with the Baltimore Symphony, Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, Omaha Symphony, and St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. He was also the Music Director for the Los Angeles Music and Art School. During his tenure at LAMusArt, Austin conducted the youth orchestra, choirs, and jazz band, while overseeing the development of curriculum and artistic direction of the ensembles. During this time he also served as a teaching artist and conductor for the LA Philharmonic Association’s *Associate Composer Program*, and was a high-call woodwind performer for musical pit orchestras in the greater Los Angeles area.

Austin received a B.M. in Music Composition from the USC Thornton School of Music in 2015, graduating Magna cum Laude. While at USC, he received the Most Valuable Player Award as a conductor and proponent of new music. Austin graduated from the Eastman School of Music in 2021 with an M.M. in Orchestral Conducting, in the studio of Neil Varon. Currently he serves as the Assistant Conductor of the Eastman Philharmonia and Eastman School Symphony Orchestra as he pursues his DMA in orchestral conducting.

~ PROGRAM NOTES ~

Threnody: In Memory of Jean Sibelius

Composed in 1965, *Threnody* was written for the centenary of Jean Sibelius' birth. Sibelius had unfortunately died 8 years earlier, in 1957, and Still was greatly affected by his death. In *Threnody*, Still pays homage to Sibelius, a composer who had created a universal idiom in Finland through his music. Still had the same aspirations with his music and the American culture and people. Sibelius and Still also admired each other's music and had both established musical voices that reflected both a nationalist view of their countries and also reflected their individuality. When Sibelius, someone who did not typically praise composers, heard Still's *Afro-American Symphony* he said, "He has something to say!" (Mendez, *Threnody*)

Threnody begins with a brass fanfare that transitions into a lush lament in the strings. These styles go back and forth from lament to slow march as if representing the funeral march and the memorial itself. Still's distinct lyrical voice is prominent in the string writing across the work, the melody is very lyrical with both blues and folk influence. Still wanted to emulate the neo romantic qualities of Sibelius. - Austin Chanu, 2024.

Symphony no. 4 "Autochthonous"

Symphony no. 4 was composed in the summer and fall of 1947 while Still lived in Los Angeles. In Still's own words about the symphony, "It is subtitled "Autochthonous", not so much in the sense that it is indigenous or aboriginal, but in the sense that it represents the spirit of the American people." (Still, Symphony no. 4) The symphony is meant to convey a fusion of different musical cultures represented in North America.

Each movement is representative of a different characteristic:

Movement 1: "exemplifies the spirit of optimism and energy - the American ability to 'get things done'."

Movement 2: "portrays sentiment, soft-heartedness, sympathy, benevolence, and the generosity of the American people."

Movement 3: "humorous and unmistakably typical of our country and its rhythms."

Movement 4: "depicts the warmth and the spiritual side of the American people, their love of mankind. The development, an epitome or compendium." (Still, Symphony no. 4)

Still was outspoken about his compositional process saying, "Melody, in my opinion, is the most important musical element. After melody comes harmony, then form, rhythm, and dynamics." (Still, *An Afro-American Composer's Viewpoint*.) In Symphony no. 4 "Autochthonous" Still began the process of composing by creating a Principal Theme that would unify the entire composition. The Principal Theme is the first melody we hear in the first movement. It is presented by the strings and is lyrical and pastoral in nature. Per Still's hierarchy the melody drives the piece. As Still composes, he allows for the melodies' traits and characteristics to create natural deviations of the planned form, to design a more natural and flowing feel to the material and form, that is still satisfying from an architectural perspective. Still also utilizes the Principal Theme throughout every movement of the symphony. In each subsequent movement, the listener will hear the Principal Theme return in variation acting as the second theme of the second, third, and fourth movements. - Austin Chanu, 2024.

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 43

The compositions of Jean Sibelius constitute a case study in the capriciousness of musical taste and the power of the artistic *avant-garde*. Pigeonholed by many as primarily a Finnish nationalist, whose dark, remote music was a shallow representative of Romanticism's last gasps, Sibelius was nevertheless deemed the champion of American and British conservative musical tastes between the world wars. Typical was Olin Downes, music critic of the *Times*, whose relentless public support of Sibelius bordered on sycophancy. Likewise, Koussevitsky, conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, programmed a cycle of Sibelius's symphonies, and dogged the composer to finish the eighth—which he never did. But, those who favored the *avant-garde* of Stravinsky, Schönberg, and company—and that included most of continental Europe, and American intellectuals—were scathing in their contempt. One respected and well-known critic entitled an essay about Sibelius, "The Worst Composer in the World." These controversies, and Sibelius's life-long struggle with alcoholism and depression no doubt played a signal part in his composing nothing of significance from the nineteen thirties until his death in 1957 at the age of 91.

But tastes change, and the current crop of composers and scholars now take a more balanced view of Sibelius's compositions. His seven symphonies enjoy renewed respect, although the ever-popular second symphony has long been a repertory standard, and—other than the evergreen *Finlandia*—is his most popular work. It is not incorrect, of course, to recognize the deeply informing rôle of nationalist Finnish elements in his music style. He consciously and assiduously studied and absorbed the musical and literary heritage of the Finnish culture and adroitly folded them into a unique personal style. He was completely taken by the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*, and early on his musical style reflected these cultural elements, from his melodic choices to the stories behind his tone poems. His symphonies are large soundscapes that surge and ebb, whose melodies often appear first as small kernels of a few notes whose significance is easily overlooked. But, as the music unfolds and these bits of melody appear in a kaleidoscope of identities, they meld together into great torrents of themes. Sibelius was a master of orchestration, and most listeners easily accept the inevitable comparisons to the bleak, cold, primordial landscapes of Finland.

Finland for centuries had been under Swedish hegemony, and then in the nineteenth century under Russian control. Many still remember Finland's heroic stand against the Soviets early in WWII (although their later cooperation with the Nazis troubled some). Sibelius's second symphony depicts, indeed, a defiant and bold stand for Finnish independence during its struggles with Russia around the turn of the twentieth century. Composed in 1902, the symphony is usually understood as a gesture of defiance in the face of the Tsar, although the composer never suggested this view. The first movement opens quietly in a fashion typical of the composer's style—no big tunes to hear and remember, but, as alluded above, just some little fragments that gradually assemble themselves. Then the process reverses itself, and the bits close the movement peacefully. The second movement is a slow sonata form that begins with a remarkable pizzicato section in the cellos and double basses, followed by a somewhat sinister theme in the bassoons. In a fashion traditional from Mozart on we next hear a lyrical contrasting theme in the strings. Most symphonies use a brisk dance form for third movements. Here Sibelius begins with energetic string figurations that soon are followed in the middle sections by a pastoral oboe solo. Then, as usual in these matters, the string section returns. This movement is blended right into the beginning of the famous last movement, one almost universally loved—well, at least known—by music lovers everywhere. Clear themes prevail, the most familiar one being the ascending three note stepwise motif. The movement closes heroically with a huge statement of this melody, with the complete brass section taking the lead. The careful listener will note that this little theme has appeared in many guises throughout the whole work. This is typical of Sibelius's craftsmanship and integrated approach to composition. In many ways this glorious finale affords the composer the last laugh over his "sophisticated" detractors. - Wm. E. Runyan, 2015.

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Still, William Grant. "Regarding your trilogy, *Africa*, the *Afro-American Symphony* and the *Symphony in G minor*."

~ **PERSONNEL** ~
Eastman Philharmonia

Violin I

Nicholas Garcia-Hettinger,
concertmaster
Noah Arcenas
Jaewon Jun
Anne-Marie Wnek
Alex Tada
Grace Belsie
Aviva Bock
Leila Fanien
Elin Schlichting
Madeleine Nysetvold
Leo Liao
Mengxiao Hong
Jia Wen Lin
Qi Chen

Violin II

Angelina Phillips,
principal
Ashni Budge
Luke Lee
Carly Paris
Emily Palmer
Paige Griffin
Alisha Stafford
Yu-Jen Weng
Leona Liu
Enyu Ye
Hyun Park

Viola

Arthur Nyanfor II,
principal
Ethan Shin
Max Wang
Juan Alvarez Jimenez
Ally Keller
Phoenix Mercier
Myles Davis
Anna Denfeld
Bayley Ginnaty
Hannah Esquivel

Violoncello

Ethan Blake,
principal
Matthew Wiest
Taylor Yoon
Ivy Robison
Hannah Sohn
Danny O'Connell
Felix Kim
Juewen Zhang

Double Bass

Janae Gaddy,
principal
Rey Sunglao
Wynter McCray
Arden Ingersoll
Luke Black
Liz Young

Flute

Emily Claman
Andrew Hanks
Angelina Lim

Oboe

Payton Brown
Myles Meader
Semira Vinson
Alexis Wilson

Clarinet

Eric Butler
Eryn Levy
Ethan Morad

Bassoon

Trey Barrett
Kenny Ford

Horn

Morgan Chalmers
Aliceyn Covington
Lea Helsel
Nathan Howton
Dylan Kingdom
Weverton Santos

Trumpet

Daniel Adamczyk
Grace Firth
Charlotte McIntosh
Kirk Morrison
Eve Shanks
Diego Turner

Trombone

Rose Cantrell
Will Hurtz
RJ James
Gabriel Williams

Tuba

Stephanie Magera

Timpani

Ben Blaesing
Fletcher Leonard
Seth Tupy

Percussion

Kaiwen Luo
Remy Thomas
Irene Yang

Harp

Lindsay Haukom

Keyboard

Mei Li



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