

**William Grant Still's Vision for American Music**

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Abstract

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William Grant Still is commonly referred to as the “Dean of Afro-American Composers” and his music seen as an expression of African-American spirit. Still’s musical success reached its peak during the time of the Harlem Renaissance, which has led him to be associated with that movement by many writers and scholars. However, several factors contest this association. He was taught from a very young age to contribute to building a new nation. He learned popular forms of musical expression, such as blues and jazz, during his time orchestrating with W. C. Handy. He imbibed a Romantic European symphonic tradition from George Whitefield Chadwick. He studied contemporary musical techniques with Edgard Varèse. Simultaneously, the Harlem Renaissance blossomed into full-blown African-American cultural uplift. Still did not stay within one particular musical style; his ability to study but not submit to a variety of styles hints at another purpose to his musical compositions. An examination of his correspondence with leading Harlem Renaissance figure Alain Locke reveals that Still, while proud of his heritage, foresaw the emergence of a new race, in which all the races in America would merge and become one. This invites re-consideration of the perceptions of Still’s brand of nationalism, as well as his relationship to American music history in general and to African-American history in particular.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

On June 17, 1954, at the American Symphony Orchestra League Convention in Springfield, Ohio, composer William Grant Still delivered a speech entitled “Toward a Broader American Culture.” Though ostensibly a plea for a renewed expression of national identity in music, it is also a retrospective look at the composer’s involvement with nationalism, dating back to the very beginning of his compositional career. “When I began my career as a serious composer in New York,” he states, “the general feeling was that all of us on the scene at that time were making a contribution to something uniquely and definitely American.”<sup>1</sup> His plea is that now is the moment (*now* being 1954) to “re-assert ourselves as Americans.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, patriotism and pride in his country are repeated soundings for Still in this speech, and no more so than in the concluding sentences, which include this quote from President Theodore Roosevelt: “The professed Internationalist usually sneers at nationalism, at patriotism, at what we call Americanism. He bids us forswear our love of country in the name of love for the world at large. We nationalists answer that he has begun at the wrong end; we say that, as the world now

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<sup>1</sup> William Grant Still, “Toward a Broader American Culture” (lecture, American Symphony Orchestra League Convention, Springfield, Ohio, June 17, 1954), in *William Grant Still: Collected Speeches & Lectures* (Flagstaff, Arizona: The Master Player Library, 2011), 19.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

is, it is only the man who loves his country first who, in actual practice, can help any country at all.”<sup>3</sup>

Still was not the first African-American composer to achieve a level of prominence in his field; previous successful composers included Harry Burleigh (1866–1949) and Nathaniel Dett (1882–1943). Still is most frequently remembered for works such as the *Afro-American Symphony* (1930) and the ballet *Sahdji* (1930) that utilized perceived African-American idioms. However he also wrote several pieces in a specifically “modernist” idiom, as well as other works that did not utilize—in title or in program—any reference to African-American tropes. All three alternatives are not scattered randomly in his output, but together indicate the changes that his musical philosophy underwent. These are apparent beginning with his work for W. C. Handy (1873–1958), where he was able to study and arrange blues music, to his very brief study with George Whitefield Chadwick (1854–1931), his even longer period of study with Edgar Varese<sup>4</sup> (1883–1965), and the correspondence and influence he received from leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, and in particular from renowned literary figure Alain Locke (1886–1954).

In light of his involvement with the Harlem Renaissance—both geographically and, it has been thought, philosophically—his previous and subsequent musical compositions can be judged in terms of that social movement. There are several problems with this, not the least of which is letting a single period define his life and works. Determinism does not, however, take into account the composer’s changing point of view. In Still’s case, this is an important issue, for his musical language, though predominantly conservative according to his contemporaries, changed

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>4</sup> Though the proper spelling of this name is Edgard Varèse, Still always referenced the composer as Edgar Varese in his writings and speeches. For the sake of compatibility with the sources I use, I have elected to use Still’s version of Varèse’s name.

throughout his career as his personal views of what music should accomplish underwent frequent revision.

As it developed, Still's personal philosophy indicated that a composer should be a master of all styles, bound to none. This can render any attempt to view his completed catalog as a whole a discussion comprised of numerous extraneous threads. In an effort to corral these issues (pursuit of which can lead to indefinite side-tracking and consideration out of context, despite the best of intentions), there has been a loose attempt to divide his life and its work into three periods.<sup>5</sup> Earnest Lamb explains these three periods in this manner: he called the period from Still's birth until 1926 the period of discovery, when Still was exploring, learning, and discovering his objectives and building his philosophies. From 1926 to the middle of the next decade is Still's self-styled "racial" period, when he sought to consciously provide a voice for African-American musical culture. From about 1935 to the end of his life in 1978 is his "universal" period, universal in the hope that music would "in some way bring about better interracial understanding in America and in other countries."<sup>6</sup> An important part of this "universal" approach was Still's ability to switch rapidly between different styles of composition. This ability makes it difficult to complete any kind of deep reading of a work by Still, for his musical language is not necessarily consistent across several works. Thus, to track any important changes in his music and in his approach to music, Still's own words assume great importance.

The issue of the Harlem Renaissance remains one of the largest. When asked about this cultural movement, Still indicated that he did not view the Renaissance as something that had a

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<sup>5</sup> Earnest Lamb, "Still Life in Black and White: An Intertextual Interpretation of William Grant Still's 'Symphonic Trilogy'" (PhD diss., University of North Texas, 2005), 65.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

specifically musical element—or that, if it did, this element manifested itself after he had moved to the West Coast of the United States, and that he had no part in it. Making such a statement requires reconsideration of not only where Still stood, but how he perceived music. Because if he did not perceive himself or his music as an extension of the ideals of African-American leaders, a vacuum of perception is immediately created that needs to be filled with more than vague associations that are justified by geographical association. His words (and the words of his wife Verna Arvey) are there, waiting.

Into this vacuum I propose that William Grant Still, in the wake of what he described as his “racial” period, assumed more assuredly the mantle of a nationalist composer. Not as one who was aspiring to compose music that typified racial nationalism, but one who was attempting to provide new direction to the term “American music.” Still’s correspondence with Alain Locke (one of the leading thinkers of the Harlem Renaissance) demonstrates the path that Still traversed as he searched for the essence that would underpin his music and contribute to his guiding principles as a composer. Still believed that American music was about to undergo a rebirth; the idea of “race” would soon be outmoded and unnecessary, for a new race would emerge which would amalgamate all the races into one—a truly “American” race.<sup>7</sup> This quest for a new American music demonstrated influences he absorbed from his time spent learning from Handy, Chadwick, and Varese, and refined during his self-described racial period. This concept of nationalism began to be expressed in his music during the 1940s, spurred on by the advent of the war. Nationalist-tinged rhetoric came to dominate much of his personal speech, whether written or spoken. Complementing this nationalist bent was Still’s frequently professed audience-centric

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<sup>7</sup> William Grant Still to Alain Locke, 13 July 1941, William Grant Still Collection, Duke University, Special Collections Library, Box 1.

purpose of the music he composed, and of his duty as a composer—both contributing to his self-styled “democratization of music.”

Navigating this path will require the traversal of some complicated terrain. Much of what Still himself said becomes highly important, since this is ostensibly creating a dichotomy between his perceived racial nationalism and his concept of American nationalism. The matter would devolve into a simple exercise in extrapolation and analysis if finding his words were all that was required. However, the question whether his words were really his has surfaced in much recent scholarship (particularly in that of Catherine Parsons Smith). After his marriage to Verna Arvey, Still let Arvey manage a large part of his correspondence—even to the extent that she wrote several letters, which he then signed. The fact that Still considered himself and his wife a single entity—both as regards music and as concerns public affairs—does not simplify the matter. His words or her words? His words passing through her pen? Her words passing through his voice? It is apparent from numerous sources that the marriage was one of equals, not one dominant and one subservient. Subsequently, the control that the family has exercised over the familial archives has made more than one researcher uncomfortable, resulting in conflicting viewpoints that necessarily occupy extremes.

As more and more researchers explore William Grant Still’s personal and professional tropes, biographical and analytical studies have become increasingly contested. Still’s most common sobriquet is “Dean of Afro American composers.” This appellation is usually defined by the list of “firsts” that constitutes such a large part of his resume. A large number of these “firsts” are tied to his racial achievements: the first black composer to have a major symphony performed, the first African-American to direct an American symphony orchestra, the first

African-American to have an opera performed by a major opera company.<sup>8</sup> Each of these achievements focuses attention on the racial aspect of his career, when in fact Still sought to distinguish himself as a human being, not a specifically black one. Unity not separation was a primary tenet of Still's music.<sup>9</sup> "The unique consequence of cataloging his achievements," writes Earnest Lamb, "venerates his position as an iconoclast while detracting critical attention from his music."<sup>10</sup> In essence, he is only being valued because of what he achieved for his race, and not for his achievements as a whole. "Conversely," Lamb continues, "if we ignore the social context in which Still produced his music, we risk misinterpreting his compositional choices or trivializing the significance of his accomplishments prior to the Civil Rights Movement in America."<sup>11</sup>

The multiplicity of resources has only recently been harnessed to explore the contexts that surround Still's life. As the composer passed away in 1978, his opinions and views were readily available for three quarters of a century. His papers and artifacts have been scrupulously preserved by his descendants. The large collections of the letters and papers of William Grant Still have been preserved at several places: The William Grant Still and Verna Arvey Papers at the University of Arkansas; the William Grant Still Collection at Duke University; a special collection of oral materials that has been acquired by the Oral History of American Music archive at Yale University. The largest collection of resources is held at the Center for William Grant Still in Flagstaff, Arizona. This is home to the Archive and to the Master-Player Library, a

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<sup>8</sup> Lamb, "Still Life in Black and White," viii.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

publishing company owned by the Center, which is responsible for publishing the documents, papers, and scholarly works that are sponsored by the Archive.

## 2.0 CHAPTER ONE

Given the value that will be placed on William Grant Still's words, issues of biography and historiography must first be explored in order to provide an academic context for the use his texts. Early approaches to Still's biography tend to be largely chronological, with little attempt to discover deeper significance via context. For example, a short biographical paper on Still by Eileen Southern was delivered in 1984 at the William Grant Still Studies Congress at the University of Arkansas only six years after his passing. The paper is meant to be a summation of the composer's life, and not intended to be an in-depth survey. To this end, it is necessarily brief and factoid, focusing on Still's training up to the completion of his studies with Varese in 1925, before devolving into a chronology of major premieres. A dissertation by Benjamin Griffith Edwards titled *The Life of William Grant Still* was published in 1987 at Harvard. While offering much greater detail, it also ultimately devolves into listing the facts of Still's life in chronological order. Fast-forward to the year 2000, and the publication of Catherine Parsons Smith's book, *A Study in Contradictions*, or articles like Gayle Murchison's "Dean of Afro-American Composers or Harlem Renaissance Man: The New Negro and the Musical poetics of William Grant Still." Previous emphasis had been placed on discovering (and, with the family's efforts, preserving) what kind of man Still was.

Some of this conservational emphasis can no doubt be attributed to the untiring efforts of his daughter, Judith Anne Still, who has written or sponsored several books about her father. Ms.

Still is not an “outsider” entering a personal world with the intent of ordering it and publishing an account of it; she was an inhabitant of her father's world. Events prior to her birth are just as secondhand when told to her, as if told to someone else. The fact that she is the daughter of the subject adds an element of authenticity to the proceedings. Any account that this relation would give, unless they were exceptionally discerning (and possibly not even then), would have to meld elements of their own life with that of their subject. What results is not autobiography, nor should it be considered as traditional biography. Instead, it is a life-story that is being molded and preserved by a third party with close relational ties to the subject. Such a biographical effort is the work not only of a researcher, but of a steward, who writes the life-story but in doing so must necessarily contribute a part of her own life-story as well.

An otherwise unverified memory may shine light where none existed; but its very existence is subject to a wide variety of influences that range from personal preference to the passage of time. The meaning of the following quotation is highly important, but is its vocabulary exact?

“I don't know what people mean by 'Black music',” [Still] would confess privately. “Are they saying that Negroes can only write music in a certain way? Are they trying to make it appear that White people and Colored people are so unlike each other that their work can't share in scope or competence? For me there is no White music or Black music—there is only music by individual men that is important if it attempts to dignify all men, not just a particular race.”<sup>12</sup>

In this statement, Still expresses wonder or frustration (probably both) at the emphasis some unknown party has placed on the external appearance of difference (and as already mentioned, this question of difference plays a crucial part in approaching Still's own oeuvre). He is not just saying that “white” and “black” should not only be equal, but intermingle and become

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<sup>12</sup> “From Composer to Composition: The Visionary Path,” in Judith Anne Still, *William Grant Still: A Voice High Sounding* (Flagstaff, Arizona: The Master-Player Library, 1990), 68.

one. (This conforms to other statements he made at different times). He is expressing a desire for every person to be treated as every other person; color and race would play no part in the value of a person, whether to society or to an individual. Amalgamation might be an implication of such a policy, but that is beyond this statement. It might also stand as Still's repudiation of the essentialist label so commonly applied to him (that of "Black composer"). Given these imports, the context becomes highly important. A "private confession" does not provide the slightest clue regarding whom Still was addressing at the time, why he said it (in response to some larger event?), and, just as vital, when? If this was uttered in Ms. Still's hearing, that reduces the time frame. But was it? Is it a statement that she heard, or that she was told by a close friend of the Stills? Was this part of a larger statement about the drawbacks of such societal categorization? The questions do not stop. The danger that this might be taken out of context is almost as large as its significance to Still's personal philosophy.

The question of influence is an important one. The official voice of the surviving family, the Master-Player Library has published a large number of volumes detailing Still's history (with many more to come, no doubt). All current publications either have Judith Anne Still as author or co-author, or have her listed as an editor. It is clearly Judith Anne Still's desire to be considered a primary source for her father's narrative. A primary source of this nature is only as useful as the understanding of its bias. She admits her own inclinations: "It must be admitted... that there is much of my own prejudice in the portrait."<sup>13</sup> She continues:

William Grant Still was a man much loved by those closest to him, by those who can attest to his affectionate and personable nature, and to his humility and perseverance. But *it is out of such love that the greatest truths about creative men must come*—therein is the point of fusion at which the man and his work are inseparable.<sup>14</sup> (emphasis mine)

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

This implies that unless a potential biographer was a part of this intimate circle, his biography would not contain “great truths.” The broader implication is that, as she was most definitely a part of this circle, she is highly qualified to provide biographical accounts and analyses. While each writer of biography necessarily brings his or her own views to their work, which inevitably taints the objectivity of the result, love is a much more subjective and hardly effective yardstick of suitability. A further implication is that such a biography would focus on the ideal image of the subject at the expense of verity or reality.

From the numerous writings of Judith Anne Still about her father, it is clear that she is not motivated by commercialism, but rather by fierce protectionism. The life-narrative that she has fostered attempts to establish her father (on a professional level) as a forgotten pioneer and a victim of his time. On a personal level, she establishes the image of a kindly, spiritual man.<sup>15</sup> However, infamous figures of history have also been thought to be gentle, loving persons by those whom they held dear. My point is not that William Grant Still was not this way; rather, I seek to point out that, contrary to Ms. Still’s statement cited above, being a part of the “intimate circle” about the subject, instead being the place where “great truths” are revealed, could be viewed instead as a “comfort zone” for which the subject reserves his/her sincerest devotion and affection. Thus members of this intimate circle, as recipients and reciprocators of intimate emotions and feelings, are treated by the subject on a special level when compared with the rest of the world. It is this special status as a member of William Grant Still’s “intimate circle” that is continually reflected in Judith Anne Still’s writings. The drawback to her authorship (and to any biographer) is the assumption that her membership in this circle certified that she knew “the real man.” Indeed, within the psychological portrait that Judith Anne Still has created of her father as

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<sup>15</sup> Judith Anne Still, “William Grant Still: Solving the Mystic Puzzle,” *A Voice High-Sounding* 119-154.

a gentle man and an excellent father, it would naturally follow that such a man would also attempt to protect those he loved from certain disagreeable facets of life—and in Still’s case, there were no doubt many. Thus, no matter how close the “intimate circle” was around William Grant Still, those most intimate would not necessarily know him best.

The problems of influence do not lessen if reviewing Still’s writings and lectures. For after his marriage to Verna Arvey in 1939, Still began to rely on her more and more—as lyricist, publicist, and collaborator. There exists an undated letter to Alain Locke (presumed to have been written in 1940) in which Still expresses regret for not writing as much as he should have. He adds that he has been so busy that “V[erna] has been doing most of my writing for me...”<sup>16</sup> Catherine Parsons Smith is one of the few scholars who have attempted to untangle what remains a thorny knot. Smith establishes that Arvey was possessed of an artistic persona prior to meeting Still, and that there was a change in her persona with her marriage.<sup>17</sup> She supplied the libretti for most of his operas after *Troubled Island*. Letters that were signed by Still were written on her typewriter.<sup>18</sup> Still’s positions on anti-communism were frequently drafted by Arvey, with the result that it is hard to discover whether there was a single author, or whether the collaborative effort is so intertwined that it is futile to discover the separate contributions of each. So, too, Still’s position on a variety of musical aesthetics, which seem to be influenced by Arvey, but again no one can be completely certain. Further, the autobiography of Still’s life was actually written by Arvey, who simply wrote using her husband’s “voice.”<sup>19</sup> However, Smith concludes

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<sup>16</sup> William Grant Still to Alain Locke, presumed date 5 July 1940, William Grant Still Collection, Box 1.

<sup>17</sup> Catherine Parsons Smith, *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 163.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

that ultimately Arvey “tried hard to surrender her identity to Still’s, willingly adjusting her views to his, being consumed by the slights that he and his work experienced, and accepting the subordinate role that Still’s working method required of his librettists.”<sup>20</sup> Further, that while Arvey’s influence is judged quite palpable in Still’s speeches and verbal writings, Still was clearly the dominant voice.<sup>21</sup> If Arvey was “managing” (or gatekeeping, as Smith calls it) Still’s affairs, it was ultimately his choice to do so, and if he vocalized positions that were in fact Arvey’s, he only did so because he found himself in agreement with their precepts.

After his marriage to Verna Arvey in 1939, what began as a personal partnership progressed to a literary partnership as well—and, by association, a musical partnership. Positions taken in press or in the public, whether by Still or Arvey, should be viewed as the statement of the pair, and not of one or the other. Enlightenment is hard to achieve in any case. Still explained in 1964, “Let me say here, before I go further, that my wife and I work together so close that I always say we, and I think that some people don’t understand.”<sup>22</sup> This maddeningly incomplete statement does little to explain the partnership; it simply indicates that it existed. Still’s own view of himself and his wife as a single entity, not just in marriage but in literature and in music, indicates he did not see any need to differentiate between himself and Verna Arvey; thus the trail of speeches, lectures, articles, diaries and letters that has yielded so much on other occasions yields little here. Perhaps these doubts concerning authenticity of statements have engendered a

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>22</sup> William Grant Still, interview by Robert A. Martin, *Music for Young Listeners*, KPFK Radio, Los Angeles California, May 1964 in *William Grant Still—An Oral History* (Flagstaff, Arizona: The Master-Player Library, 1998), 70.

distrust, not only of what Still had to say, but of the narrative that the family has attempted to establish.

Several studies have attempted to re-interrogate Still's historiography with respectful questioning. Catherine Parsons Smith attempted to delve deeper, and received some stinging backlash from the family. Smith's short biography of the composer was published in 2008 as part of the University of Illinois Press' *American Composers* series. For such a small volume (116 pages), the biography has achieved widespread acclaim, being called "a superb general reference" by Josephine Wright and "the standard work on William Grant Still" by Wayne Shirley.<sup>23</sup>

Smith's approach to Still is directed towards a single event in the life-story, which served as a transition from one way of life to another. Transitions "into different environments have the potential to produce dramatic change in both the internal and the external aspects of the life course. Such transitions are typically called "turning points" and allow for new opportunities and behavioral patterns."<sup>24</sup> The turning point which is the focus of Smith's biography is 1949 the premiere of Still's opera *Troubled Island*. *Troubled Island* is established as Still's definitive work ("If Still's career can be said to have had a single high point, this was it."<sup>25</sup>) What comes before is covered in great detail for so short a volume; what comes after is treated as little more than epilogue. As *Troubled Island* is made the crucial event in the life-narrative, understanding her

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<sup>23</sup> As quoted on the jacket of Catherine Parsons Smith, *William Grant Still*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Michael J. Shanahan, and Ross Macmillan. *Biography and the Sociological Imagination: Contexts and Contingencies*. (New York: W. W. Norton and & Co., 2008), 82.

<sup>25</sup> Catherine Parsons Smith, *William Grant Still*, 69.

account of it and its contexts is crucial to understanding her approach to the rest of the biography.

Initial significance is established by discussing the impact of the premiere on Still's life; this is referenced in the introduction. The fact that Smith brings the incident in at the very beginning of the volume indicates the level of importance that she attaches to it. The presence of Langston Hughes is also celebrated; Smith states that *Troubled Island* was “the only one of Still's operas on which he worked with an established poet.”<sup>26</sup> The fact that immediately after this she makes the statement that “although he composed six more operas, he never again worked with any writer but Verna Arvey”<sup>27</sup> implies (but does not explicitly state) an inferior quality of these subsequent collaborations. This is also a re-iteration of an earlier statement by Smith that Still “limited himself” by only accepting Arvey's libretti.<sup>28</sup> Further, when Still had a “falling out” with Hughes in 1947 during preparations for the premiere, Verna Arvey supplied the necessary corrections to the libretto. The problems with Hughes escalated into a full-fledged dispute that was published in the newspapers. Smith makes the claim (with no supporting evidence) that “It is more than likely that Arvey drafted both [Still's] 1947 letter [to Hughes] and the pre-performance *Times* story.”<sup>29</sup> So the question of authenticity of speech rears its head once more—and the assumption that Arvey usurped Still's voice is made in the most blatant manner possible.

Still's initial relationship with his librettist, however, is passed over as being largely harmonious, and most of remainder of the chapter is divided into a discussion of the production

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 75.

and the reception of the finished work. The production was delayed over several years. Smith spends some time discussing the issue of an “all-Negro” cast, which director Leopold Stokowski had desired and Still had repudiated.<sup>30</sup> Little attention is given, nor are there any works cited, about the possible impact the war might have had on the attempt to raise funds to produce *Troubled Island*. The opera had been completed in 1941, an auspicious year. Smith does observe that “World War II slowed [Still's] campaign,” and that Stokowski first saw the score in 1944, implying three years of waiting. Had the problem of raising money for an artistic performance in a war-torn economy been addressed, it might detract from the racial struggle that is the focus of Smith's narrative.

Smith's final point of the chapter is, in fact, the objective, the moment of impact, and the trajectory thesis of her entire volume. Revivals of operas and performances of other new operas did not result in a re-staging of *Troubled Island*. Though sets had been built and costumes made, no revival ensued during Still's lifetime. Coupled with the production of other stage works that featured aspects of African-American life that were written by white composers, Smith's conclusion is that *Troubled Island* was not revived because there was no acceptable “place” for an African-American composer of art-music. *Troubled Island* was a solitary break-through that demonstrated “just how much breaking through had not yet taken place.”<sup>31</sup> The struggle that has been the focus of the narrative is clearly defined: Still made a living in more popular art forms as an arranger and instrumentalist, but save for a few solitary champions, his music was not widely accepted because of his race. After *Troubled Island*, what prominence he had gained was negated by his own withdrawal from society.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 79.

The succeeding chapters serve as an epilogue. Still, disappointed by events surrounding the performance of *Troubled Island*, and its reception, lashed out, blaming his lack of success on a Communist conspiracy of the arts. The perceived destruction of “approachable” (universal) music by modernist (intellectual) Communists is depicted as becoming something of a fixation with Still. Smith sees these outbursts as a reflection of Still's frustration with the faltering of his career.<sup>32</sup> This is paired with statements about his isolation from leading racial and political thought, since he lived in Los Angeles rather than New York.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the *Troubled Island* premiere is portrayed as a shattering event that completely altered not only Still's life trajectory, but also his perceptions of the world around him. Living in “isolation,” lashing out at Communists, and allowing his correspondence to be managed by his wife, Verna Arvey, paints the picture of a man who, after an initial protest, withdrew from active life. As a result of this withdrawal, Still “lost much of his national audience,”<sup>34</sup> thus rendering the compositions of his later period largely irrelevant during his lifetime. Smith's summary of Still's life paints him as an artist who challenged the establishment, not only of white expectations but of African-American expectations as well (this is an interesting side-note which was not explored in depth in the text). Smith concludes by firmly identifying Still as another “major American voice”<sup>35</sup> that remained

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<sup>32</sup> There is an additional possibility, stated by Smith and Murchison in “Was *Troubled Island* Seen by Critics as a Protest Opera?” (*American Music Research Center Journal* 13 [2003]), that the idea of a Communist plot was a creation of Verna Arvey—implying that Still endorsed it, or accepted that his wife was postulating such a theory which may not have represented how he felt about the situation. However, unless Verna Arvey was also writing Still's diary for him, the idea that the Stills' theory of a Communist plot was entirely her creation quickly becomes untenable. See excerpts from the diaries of William Grant Still in *Just Tell the Story: Troubled Island*, 169-255.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, *William Grant Still* (2008), 82.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

an embodiment of the Harlem Renaissance. This reference to the Renaissance seems oddly placed, almost as a postscript.

Judith Anne Still maintains her position as someone with close, intimate knowledge of the subject, while Catherine Parsons Smith attempts to place the subject within the context of his time, and associate him with larger societal and cultural movements. One claims to tell history by knowing the man, and the other claims to know the man by recounting history. What makes this conflict especially interesting is that Judith Anne Still penned a rebuttal of Smith's biography, elucidating what she believed to be the chief errors of the volume. This particular document is posted on the website of the William Grant Still archive as a protest of inaccuracies in Smith's biography. In making her position clear, Judith Anne Still demonstrates her biographical approach more clearly than any analysis of her previous writings. She claims that access was given to all of the Still family's documents, and that Smith deliberately refused the testimony of close friends and family of the subject—of those who knew him best. If true, this indicates that Smith was highly conscious of the Still family's influence over the life-narrative of William Grant Still, and her determination to remain as free from that influence as possible. This relates to an attempt by Smith to preserve the idea of Gershwin as an innovator in the use of “race music,” when in fact Still was “first.” The daughter's protection here is to maintain Still as the innovator, not Gershwin—a path that could become increasingly untenable as new research about Gershwin comes to light.<sup>36</sup> Judith Anne Still further claims an incorrect portrayal of her father's time at Wilberforce University, claiming exclusion of or failure to verify facts. The fact that Smith devotes three pages to a “knife-fight” out of a ninety-four-page biography does place an agogic stress on the incident. Judith Anne Still refers constantly to documents and supporting

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<sup>36</sup> Joseph Horowitz, Interview with the author, February 10, 2011.

material, whether in debunking the supposed love triangle among Arvey, Still, and Langston Hughes, or in refuting the charge that Arvey was controlling and Still completely dependent upon her. The criticism of the treatment of *Troubled Island* rings more of offended dignity than much else, however, because Catherine Smith refused to use the daughter's book *Just Tell the Story* as a source. This indicates yet again Smith's desire to break free from the control the family exercised over Still and his legacy.

Questions of authorship and authenticity are thus a concern of any study that would elucidate stances and facts about Still based on his written testimony. However, perhaps too much has been made of the issue of Verna Arvey, for Still's long collaboration with her cannot be ruled as anything other than a success: *their* works (like the numerous operas on which they worked together) appeared with regularity through the 1950s. Still's other compositions—such as the later three symphonies and numerous commissions and concert pieces—may not have been composed if he had not been provided an environment conducive to work. Perhaps the closeness of their working relationship was so tied to their personal relationship that to explain one would mean explaining the other, which is something the family no doubt desires to remain private. Perhaps, in an effort to affirm the composer as the locus and centerpiece of his music (and, by association, his decisions, his contexts, and influences), the idea of a marriage as simply a collaboration, instead of a domination by one party or the other, has been overlooked by several academic investigators in an attempt to avoid the complexities that such a collaboration might bring to scholarly work. Still's identity as a composer, after 1939, was not simply as

himself, William Grant Still, but in the words of Jon Michael Spencer, was “*they*, Verna and Billy.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Jon Michael Spencer, “An Introduction to William Grant Still,” in “The William Grant Still Reader,” ed. Jon Michael Spencer, special issue, *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 60.

### 3.0 CHAPTER TWO

A discussion of influences on William Grant Still and his musical outlook must contain references to his written (as opposed to musical) legacy. Since what follows features a prominent discussion based upon what Still wrote and said, a consideration of the authorship of these statements was in order. That said, considering positions formerly thought to be Still's to be held by both Still and Arvey effects little change to their import. The question of identity within his music has nearly always been tied to his racial identity, and by what he achieved *for* that identity. Little consideration has been given as a result to his attempt to create an *American* music, not just an African-American music. Those entities that impacted the composer will be divided into two groups: the musical influences and the ideological influences. Still's musical influences are less complicated to map than his ideologies. He only undertook formal music study with a few people, after which his musical development was largely self-determined (background material as in *Costaso*, or the effort to use authentic musical elements as in *Troubled Island*). Ideologically, Still would be influenced by several writers of the Harlem Renaissance; most prominent of these would be Alain Locke.

The problem that concerns any discussion of Still's ideology is that a discussion of several items generally viewed through a strictly musical lens—i.e. nationalism and modernism—must be discussed in conjunction with the same issues in African-American culture of the time. Nationalistic music must be considered as to whether it was an expression of a nation

(in this case, America) or a race (African-American). Sometimes in Still's case, the argument can be made for both, as for instance in the *Afro-American Symphony*, which is most obviously an expression of African-American racial nationalism. However, as it typifies a uniquely American experience, it can also be viewed as representing a (racially-tinged) facet of American nationalism. Or, again, in referring to the choral ballad *And They Lynched Him to a Tree*: it was written as protest of lynching, which primarily claimed African-American victims in the United States. However, the confinement of the problem to the United States implies a specifically American nationalism in parallel with the racial nationalism. The concept of modernism in a discussion of Still is just as confusing. Modernism enjoyed connotations that ranged from contemporary (within our time) modernism, to musical modernism and black modernism. Perhaps these complications are a reflection of the duality for which Du Bois strove in his desire for it to be possible for a man to be "both a Negro and an American."<sup>38</sup>

This idea of duality was referred to by another great intellectual, Booker T. Washington, as a "nation within a nation."<sup>39</sup> However, according to Lawrence Friedman, Washington also maintained that "blacks could not have progressed without the help and guidance of the 'civilized' and 'cultivated' white race. Therefore, the Negro stood to gain by becoming an integral part of the white man's society."<sup>40</sup> Still sought to go beyond this concept of duality. His belief that there would emerge a new race that was an amalgamation of all races—one in which a person's race would be indistinguishable—is perhaps the greatest indicator of this. This

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<sup>38</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903; New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003), 9. Citations are to the Barnes and Noble Edition.

<sup>39</sup> Lawrence J. Friedman, "Life 'In the Lion's Mouth': Another Look at Booker T. Washington," *The Journal of Negro History* 59, no. 4 (October 1974): 342

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

amalgamation was did not view the “white race” as absorbing the African-American. Instead, these races (and others in America)<sup>41</sup> would contribute in parallel to the “new race” that would emerge. The aim of his so-called “universal period” of composition was to elevate the culture of African-Americans, while ultimately producing music that would signify the new “raceless” race.

Thus, a new conundrum is introduced to the study of William Grant Still: how does he continue to promote and dignify the achievements of African-Americans while seeking to de-objectify race as an entity? The answer Still discovered was the creation of a new music that would begin with his location (as in the “Autochthonous” symphony) before expanding to include an entire half of the globe (his *Symphony No. 5* “Western Hemisphere”). Still was in fact proposing a new internationalism in music, one that would utilize any musical discipline available, but be subordinate to none—a true fusion of cultures.

This idea of building infused many aspects of Still’s life. Whether the question was of building his own musical language, an African-American culture, American culture, or aiding in the creation of a Utopian all-embracing nation, the concept of building and of crafting something where nothing existed before was not an ideal that he discovered free of any influence. In fact, Still’s desire to build was fostered by the earliest and most direct influence that anyone can possess: his mother. Carrie Still Shepperson was a person of strong character, demonstrating tough self-reliance from an early age, and refusing to “take anything from anybody” in the way

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<sup>41</sup> Though generally viewed through the lens of African-Americanism, William Grant Still’s own ethnic makeup was in fact part African-American, part Cherokee and part Irish. See Benjamin Griffith Edwards, “The Life of William Grant Still” (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 1987), 47.

of derogatory remarks concerning her mixed race.<sup>42</sup> As a school teacher she demonstrated high standards, and had no qualms in making her students adhere to them. As a woman, she dealt with her marriage, the birth of her son (William Grant) and the death of her husband all within the same year.<sup>43</sup> She was passionate about her teaching, and about her son. Judith Anne Still, no doubt communicating one of her father's memories, said, "Carrie [Still Shepperson] felt that the most important thing for people to have in a growing culture—besides freedom—was education."<sup>44</sup> Further:

She might have smiled also had she heard some of the comments that are made today about the people of her time. "Negroes seventy-five years ago were ignorant, and were not allowed to develop their talents." "White men built America." She would probably tell anyone who made such statements that the nation-builders were not all white, and that they were not all men. And then she would demand that the misguided apologize for their ignorance... Indeed, it was Carrie who had tried to teach her son about nation-building.<sup>45</sup>

Though clearly an extrapolation of stories told to her by her father, this passage provides a hint of the type of upbringing that Still received, which included a heavy dose of responsibility. For the implication is that, like her son, Carrie Still Shepperson fostered a belief not only in African-American achievement, but also in the achievement of the nation. In addition, the idea of contributing to the building of a larger societal entity was a principle that would remain constant throughout William Grant Still's career. The identity of the entity that he sought to build is what would shift as his personal beliefs and ideologies changed over time.

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<sup>42</sup> Judith Anne Still, "Carrie Still Shepperson: The Hollows of Her Footsteps," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (Spring, 1983): 44.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

Still was enrolled for several years at Wilberforce University. “It was after I had enrolled...that I decided I must become a composer.”<sup>46</sup> Though he had taken violin lessons from a young age, he had never really been that engrossed in the instrument: “It was my mother who insisted that I practice regularly.”<sup>47</sup> Despite this, music was his desired major when the prospect of attending college arose. After his first year at Wilberforce, however, he expressed a desire to transfer from Wilberforce to Oberlin for the express purpose of studying music. His mother was adamant that he continue at Wilberforce, where he was studying medicine. The situation was exacerbated when Still’s stepfather purchased a gramophone and several albums. “Still had never before heard a full rendition of an operatic aria... [H]e ‘thrilled to’ this grand new music. The operas of Puccini and Verdi dominated the selection, and *Rigoletto* was an early favorite.”<sup>48</sup> The musical program at Wilberforce, however, was non-existent at that time (1911–1914).<sup>49</sup> There was a school band. In his own words, “The band had had a student bandmaster before I got there, and after I got settled I took over the band.”<sup>50</sup> Still taught himself to play a variety of instruments, most of them wind instruments from the band’s available instruments. Most of the repertoire was marches, many of them by Sousa.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> William Grant Still, “My Arkansas Boyhood,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (Autumn 1967): 291.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Edwards, “The Life of William Grant Still,” 55.

<sup>49</sup> Eileen Southern, “William Grant Still,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 3, no. 2 (May 1975): 167

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

Still's relationship with the great bandleader and bluesman W. C. Handy began in 1915 when he joined Handy's band to play cello and oboe.<sup>52</sup> Though there is little record of the level of Still's expertise on either instrument, Handy's standards were very high. Whatever his skill as a player, Still soon gravitated to the position of arranger, making some of the first band arrangements of the "St. Louis Blues" and the "Beale Street Blues."<sup>53</sup> The relationship was severed for a time when Still went to study music at Oberlin, and subsequently enlisted in the Navy in 1918. The reason for this last action (as Catherine Parsons Smith has noted), like so many other gaps in the history of his early years, remains unfilled. "Also unanswered," Smith elaborates, "is the question of what he was able to achieve during the periods of freelance work, the last one ending with the 1919 job offer from W. C. Handy in New York."<sup>54</sup> For, after returning to America in 1919, he had returned to Oberlin to continue his study; the offer of a job from Handy in New York ended his studies and returned him to a more active musical life. He ceased playing in Handy's band in 1920, joining Deacon Jones' Clef Club Band.<sup>55</sup> The actual time he spent playing is not determined; in any case, his performance relationship with Handy was fragmentary, consisting of snippets here and there. However, his reputation as an arranger grew rapidly. From growing up around operas and other "art" music, Still's practical experience playing and performing in New York also put and kept him in touch with a popular type of music. "It was my good fortune," Still wrote, "to be a part of the jazz world when I was young,

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<sup>52</sup> Eileen Southern and W. C. Handy, "Letters from Handy to Still," *The Black Perspective in Music* 7, no. 2 (Autumn, 1979): 199. In a different interview (also with Eileen Southern), Still admits to playing the cello and the violin ("Conversation with William Grant Still," *The Black Perspective in Music* 3, no. 2, 1975).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Catherine Parsons Smith, "William Grant Still in Ohio (1911-1919)," *American Music* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 222.

<sup>55</sup> Edwards, "The Life of William Grant Still," 68.

and when jazz itself was new.”<sup>56</sup> Though ultimately believing that jazz was not much more than a style of performing,<sup>57</sup> Still was determined to learn as much as possible from his experience performing and arranging for bands in New York. Recalling this period in an interview in 1967, he said he was resolved to “let [this kind of music] teach me something... And it taught me.”<sup>58</sup>

Exactly what it taught him is less clear. Perhaps, in this interview from later in his life, he was simply referring to African-American music as a whole. For his upbringing did not include much of what is classified as jazz or blues. He had experienced “shouting” in church as a child.<sup>59</sup> His stepfather, Charles Shepperson, had introduced him to “the best in serious music.”<sup>60</sup> Much of Still’s time up to his job with Handy had been spent as a free-lance musician, working by playing in orchestras and ensembles wherever he could find a job.<sup>61</sup> “I didn’t come into contact with much Negro music until I had become of age and had entered professional work,” Still observed later in life. “I had to go out and learn it, I didn’t hear it.”<sup>62</sup> Having already received a musical education at Wilberforce and Oberlin, Still’s work with Handy introduced him to an entirely new (to Still) sort of music, then: his time spent playing and arranging for Handy—both before and after the war—was an opportunity not only to explore the idiom of blues, but also to begin

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<sup>56</sup> William Grant Still as quoted in Edwards, “The Life of William Grant Still,” 68.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>58</sup> William Grant Still interviewed by R. Donald Brown, *Oral History Program, California Black Oral History Project*, California State University Fullerton, November 13, 1967 in *William Grant Still: An Oral History*, 16.

<sup>59</sup> Gayle Murchison, “Nationalism in William Grant Still and Aaron Copland Between the Wars: Style and Ideology” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1998), 108.

<sup>60</sup> Judith Anne Still, “Carrie Still Shepperson: The Hollows of Her Footsteps,” 43.

<sup>61</sup> See the complete article by Catherine Parsons Smith, “William Grant Still in Ohio (1911-1919).”

<sup>62</sup> William Grant Still interviewed by R. Donald Brown, *Oral History Program, California Black Oral History Project*, California State University Fullerton, November 13, 1967 in *William Grant Still: An Oral History*, 19.

combining that music with the training he had already received. It was, in effect, his first chance to fuse his musical training with an African-American idiom. It was shortly after his time with Handy's band ended that he worked for Black Swan Records, and joined the orchestra of the musical *Shuffle Along*—which in 1923 toured to Boston, where he studied for a few months with George Whitefield Chadwick.

Few particulars are known concerning Still's period of study with George Chadwick in 1921. Chadwick himself was in the twilight of his career, having seen his greatest successes come in the concert hall via the symphonic genre. The operatic work that was meant to be the crowning achievement of his career, *Il Padrone*, had been rejected by the Metropolitan Opera, and would never be performed in his lifetime. However, as director of the New England Conservatory for over thirty years, he was greatly respected by his fellow musicians—even if by the 1920s the performance of his compositions had trailed off. Though his musical style was rooted in a Germanic, romantic idiom, Chadwick had attempted to create a uniquely American twist on that tradition.

Of Still's studies with Chadwick, little is known other than what Still recounted of the experience in interviews, articles, and speeches. Still was the one who went to Chadwick, seeking the older composer's opinion. Chadwick was apparently impressed enough with the young man's work to offer to teach him free of charge.<sup>63</sup> Gayle Murchison observes, "This free tutelage of Still by Chadwick can be viewed as a form of patronage. Still consequently was never formally enrolled in New England Conservatory. His status was that of a private student of

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<sup>63</sup> William Grant Still, "My Life's Work" (lecture "for a General Audience" 1968), in *William Grant Still: Collected Speeches & Lectures*, 98.

Chadwick's.”<sup>64</sup> Both indicate the high esteem in which Chadwick held the young man as a composer.

Several of Still's reflections indicate the esteem, in turn, in which he held Chadwick. In a speech in 1966, Still refers to Chadwick as “That wonderful pioneer American composer, George W. Chadwick, [who] introduced me to the possibilities inherent in serious American music.”<sup>65</sup> In 1969 he observed, “from [Chadwick] I gained an appreciation of the American tradition and potential in music.”<sup>66</sup> And in 1975, only a few years before his passing, Still looked back at his long career and observed, “It was [Chadwick] more than anyone else who inspired me to write American music.”<sup>67</sup> It is important to note that, in Still's mind, his studies with Chadwick occurred before he began “serious study of the African musical idiom.”<sup>68</sup> Due to the lack of specific documentation, it is impossible to say for certain, but it seems probable that Chadwick—who had grappled with the nationalistic problem of what constituted American music for much of his career—furnished the young man with an ideological framework for composing in the spirit of a specific societal entity. This lends itself to several interesting questions. If Chadwick were Still's inspiration to compose American music, this inspiration occurred prior to Still's urge to compose specifically racial music. Was Still's urge to compose racial music rooted in his urge to compose nationalistic music? If so, once the Harlem

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<sup>64</sup> Gayle Murchison, “Nationalism in William Grant Still and Aaron Copland,” 115.

<sup>65</sup> William Grant Still, “American Art and Culture: The Negro's Contribution... Symposium” (University of California Irvine, October 24, 1966), in *William Grant Still: Collected Speeches & Lectures*, 84.

<sup>66</sup> William Grant Still, “Negro Music” (lecture, Afro-American Studies Workshop, University of California Los Angeles, July 22, 1969), in *William Grant Still: Collected Speeches & Lectures*, 124.

<sup>67</sup> Eileen Southern, “William Grant Still,” 170.

<sup>68</sup> William Grant Still, “African Music and Its Influence in the New World” (Lecture, Chadwick School, Rolling Hills, California, July 30, 1961), in *William Grant Still: Collected Speeches & Lectures*, 45.

Renaissance ran its course, nationalism was what he returned to. However brief the encounter with George Chadwick, it was clear that Still entertained a great respect not only for the man, but also for what he had learned from the man. When speaking of education in New England, Du Bois was speaking almost two decades before Still's encounter with Chadwick, but his words could have been Still referring to his older teacher: "This was the gift of New England to the freed Negro: not alms, but a friend; not cash, but character... In actual formal content their curriculum was doubtless old-fashioned, but in educational power it was supreme, for it was the contact of living souls."<sup>69</sup> Nationalism, whether racial or not, was to prove Still's stock-in-trade; and the character that Chadwick sought to instill in him set him free to pursue his own path. It was not the hard-earned compositional currency that Still took away from his New England lessons, it was an awareness of himself, and the search for his own compositional character.

In 1923, Still was the recording manager for the African-American record company, *Black Swan Records*. "At that time, he stated, I was not playing in shows and I was no longer orchestrating for Handy, nor was I playing in dance orchestras... Varese had written [Harry] Pace, and asked him to recommend someone for this scholarship that he was offering."<sup>70</sup> Though his employer was about to throw the letter into the wastebasket, Still stopped him. His application to study with Edgar Varese was successful. Still was quite straightforward concerning his studies with Varese. This frankness might have something to do with the fact that Still rejected Varese's predominating method of composition for his own purposes. This is not to say that he did not find any aspect of his study useful. In discovering "his own voice," Still

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<sup>69</sup> Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 75-76.

<sup>70</sup> William Grant Still, interview by R. Donald Brown, California State University-Fullerton Oral History Program, November and December, 1967, in *William Grant Still—An Oral History* (Flagstaff, Arizona: The Master-Player Library, 1998), 17.

accepted Varese's instruction as another method of expression to be added to the ones he had already imbibed. The musical "modernist" mode that Varese taught was very much in the avant-garde of the time: "I recall that when I was studying with Mr. Varese, the thing he repeated most often was, 'Don't get soft!' He felt that whatever was melodic or harmonious was an indication of weakness."<sup>71</sup> Still felt this was not acceptable for what he wanted to express in music.

In the mid-Twenties, I made my first appearance as a serious composer in New York. Some of the New York critics were enthusiastic over my work and prophesied great things for me. However, I wasn't completely satisfied with it, the reason being that I had been studying with Edgar Varese, one of the leaders of the avant-garde movement. The result was that my early compositions were extremely dissonant and not too well organized. I soon began to feel that this ultra-modern idiom was not expressing *me*, so I decided to develop a racial idiom that would.<sup>72</sup>

This passage is from a speech made relatively late in Still's life; earlier, he had not been so circumspect. Possibly because of previous disappointment, or conspiracies believed to be levied against him, some of his previous remarks were brusque, inflammatory, or even disparaging:

Possibly some of you know that for me, the so-called "avant-garde" is now the *rear guard*, for I studied with its high priest, Edgar Varese, in the Twenties, and became a devoted disciple... I learned a great deal from the avant-garde idiom and from Mr. Varese, but—just as with jazz—I learned, but did not bow to its complete domination.<sup>73</sup>

Still made a similar statement in 1969 when he observed that his study with Varese "served to broaden my horizons. Through it, I learned to break away from conventional methods when that seemed advisable; I also was introduced to the valuable art of controlled

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<sup>71</sup> William Grant Still, "Some Thoughts on 'Contemporary' Music" (Banquet address, Music Teachers' Association, Williamsburg Inn, Southern California, June 13, 1967), in *William Grant Still: Collected Speeches & Lectures*, 91.

<sup>72</sup> William Grant Still, "Music: A Vital Force in American Race Relations" (Lecture, Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, Virginia, March 1971), in *William Grant Still: Collected Speeches & Lectures*, 133.

<sup>73</sup> William Grant Still, "The History and Future of Black-American Music Studies" (lecture, Indiana University, June 21, 1969), in *William Grant Still: Collected Speeches & Lectures*, 118.

experimentation.”<sup>74</sup> Varese’s ultimate impact, according to his own impressions, was not so much a discernable style as the realization that being dominated by any one musical style was not how he wanted to approach the musical discipline. Given the “popular” background of his work with W. C. Handy and the ideas concerning American music instilled by George Chadwick, both of whom were dominated by specific traditions, Still’s recognition of Varese’s teachings as “just another style” indicate a true coming-of-age moment. Suddenly, it was not enough to write music for this arranger or to please that teacher. Chadwick may have awakened a desire to search; under Varese, Still discovered what he needed to search for. Edwards observes, “Varese’s ultimate contribution was to help him find for himself the artistic abilities and the personal mission with which he could balance and shape those lessons of his youth.”<sup>75</sup>

This varied musical education “laid the foundation for what was to become a hallmark of his music—a fusion of styles and cultures.”<sup>76</sup> At this point Still launched himself into a churning cultural uplift. His rejection of Varese’s philosophy (but not his techniques), because through it he could not express the plight of African-Americans in the nation, indicates that in attempting to create original orchestral works (not arrangements), Still questioned his compositional goal. That arranging “popular” tunes for orchestra was not enough for him musically was proven by his desire to further his education with two great teachers. For the first time he was faced with the task of composing large-scale orchestral works that were to be performed in societal circles that judged artistic merit. Still drew on his previous experiences to consider the question: for what purpose would he write? The internal questioning may have been an easy one to undergo. The

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<sup>74</sup> William Grant Still, “My Life’s Work” (lecture “for a General Audience” 1968), in *William Grant Still: Collected Speeches & Lectures*, 99.

<sup>75</sup> Edwards, “The Life of William Grant Still,” 76.

<sup>76</sup> Lamb, “Still Life in Black and White,” 64.

decision to write “racial” music could not have been made without influence from the sudden upsurge of African-American thought and culture that occurred at that time in New York, commonly referred to as the Harlem Renaissance.

Regardless of who is speaking, most historians agree that the Harlem Renaissance is primarily perceived as a literary movement,<sup>77</sup> whose goal was the highlighting, creation, and establishment of African-American achievement. If this entity were agreed upon by the leading African-American thinkers of the time, and how to set about establishing new African-American achievement equally agreed upon, then this would be a short discussion. Unfortunately, few agreed upon how to organize African-American thought, and what elements of African-American were worthy of notice were equally disputed. The people who populated, dominated, and otherwise drove the cultural movement forward are conceptualized by Cary Wentz as “a group of young writers orbiting somewhat erratically around several older black intellectuals... This group, consisting of people such as James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, and W. E. B. Du Bois, generally helped lesser-known black writers make contacts with white publishers and potential patrons. As such, they exerted considerable influence and a certain amount of control over aspiring black writers.”<sup>78</sup>

Some African-American critics, such as Benjamin Brawley, feared that overly realistic depictions of the ghetto (and, by implication, any forms associated with these depictions, such as the blues) would not serve to “raise” the culture, but would only serve as a further source of

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<sup>77</sup> This is the case whether referencing Cary Wintz’s *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance* (Houston, Texas: Rice University Press, 1988) 2, Nathan Irvin Huggins’ *Harlem Renaissance* (1971, updated edition 2007) 9, Samuel Floyd’s *Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance* (1990) 1, or Gayle Murchison’s article “Dean of Afro-American Composers or Harlem Renaissance Man: The New Negro and the Musical Poetics of William Grant Still,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 44.

<sup>78</sup> Cary D. Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, 2.

degradation and cause for ridicule.<sup>79</sup> Langston Hughes understood the situation, realizing that in the “new” culture many people desired to put “their best foot forward, their politely polished and cultured foot—and only that foot.”<sup>80</sup> As a result, “my poems or Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* [critics] did not like, sincere though we might be.”<sup>81</sup> The respectability to which Hughes refers was particularly espoused by Du Bois and Locke. Locke, in particular, was presented and viewed as an “elite” African-American. A leading African-American publication described him as a “brilliant exemplar of that poise and insight which are happy omens for the Negro’s future.”<sup>82</sup> The question of artistic class would be one of the wedges driven between primary thinkers of the movement, and in particular between Still and several other leaders of the Harlem Renaissance. For many of them—and Alain Locke, one of the most prolific writers, is an obvious example—were not simply aspiring for high African-American culture; they were aspiring to high culture “above the common man.”<sup>83</sup> Still’s early attempts to create “modernist” music fit within the advancing parameters of art music of the time (hence the approval of these efforts by Locke). It can be said that Still’s musical principles interfered with the agenda of the Harlem Renaissance, for not only did he use “lower” art forms (such as the blues) as a basis for his music, his interpretation of what was best for the “common man” centered on pleasing the audience, not educating it.

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 129.

<sup>83</sup> Langston Hughes was one of the few who did not discount so-called “low” artistic forms in search of cultural expression. See Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 5.

Of the “older black intellectual” that Wentz acknowledges, probably the most influential on Still’s approach to African-American music was Alain Locke. Locke was one of the “patrons” who tried to help younger writers find their footing; Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes were two of his most successful protégés.<sup>84</sup> However, the specter of rarefication again raises its head—not this time in relation to subject matter (“low” versus “high” art), but in the matter of political influence and the use of it. Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston was highly critical of Locke for the exclusivity she claimed he cultivated. In an upsurge of African-American thought, Wentz pinpoints Locke as one of the primary figures who sought to “define and label the Renaissance as a literary movement.”<sup>85</sup> In essence, in a movement that opened so many horizons, Locke was viewed by some as attempting to impose boundaries. Further, his volume *The New Negro*, hailed by many as a spiritual guide of the Harlem Renaissance, was a “dramatic demonstration” of cultural pluralism.<sup>86</sup> In a movement establishing momentum by celebrating uniqueness, an avowal of distinction with a view to amalgamation was not an automatic sell. The seeds for Still’s larger world-view would be planted here, though their emergence would not happen for another decade or so in his correspondence with Locke.

Several chapters of *The New Negro* are devoted to a discussion of music: the implications of a search for an African-American musical identity; what resources might aid in that search; and a few possible ways in which it might be realized. The discussions of music in *The New Negro* (and Locke’s later volume, *The Negro and His Music*) contain predictions for African-

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<sup>84</sup> Cary D. Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, 116.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>86</sup> That is, hailing a multiplicity of cultures and celebrating difference instead of seeking harmony and accord. See George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 78.

American music, which would not be filled by William Grant Still. Spirituals are the primary musical form that Locke discusses in *The New Negro*. Yet this is a musical form that Still deliberately shied away from approaching, for the simple reason that spirituals were what an African-American composer was expected to write.<sup>87</sup> A key to contribution to their elevation to a classic folk expression is their “universality of appeal.”<sup>88</sup> This “universality”—claimed for the music, but never defined—is what will enable the music to “transcend the level of its origin.”<sup>89</sup> Much of his discussion of the spiritual centers on where it has come from, and what constitutes a spiritual (both musically and formally). It is only as he nears the end of his chapter that Locke addresses the question of how to use this great resource for the basis of a national music. “Maintaining a special kinship with the best traditions of this great folk art, [the Negro musician] must make himself the recognized vehicle of both its transmission and its further development.”<sup>90</sup> Locke makes clear with this statement that, for an African-American music, African-Americans must write, perform, and develop the idiom. His ideas concerning this development begin with Harry Burleigh’s performance of spirituals with “added concert furbelows and alien florid adornments.” The purity of the folk-form, he implies, is lost in such a presentation. “Even Negro composers have been perhaps too much influenced by formal European idioms and mannerisms in setting these songs.”<sup>91</sup> Yet, when comparing Paul Robeson

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<sup>87</sup> William Grant Still, “Negro Music in the Americas” (lecture, Los Angeles Museum, November 2, 1947), in *William Grant Still: Collected Speeches & Lectures*, 16.

<sup>88</sup> Alain Locke, *The New Negro* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1925. New York: MacMillan, 1992), 199. Citations are to the MacMillan edition.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

and Roland Hayes' differing styles, he admits that "so long as the peculiar quality of the Negro song is maintained, and the musical idiom kept unadulterated, there is and can be no set limitation." Locke envisaged the creation of a grand choral tradition to be built upon the spirituals as they can "undergo without breaking its own boundaries, intricate and original development in directions already the line of advance in modernistic music."<sup>92</sup>

Locke's vision for the use of spirituals involves a preservation of the "peculiar quality" of the song, as well as "the purity of the folk-form." While an avoidance of European influence is clearly implied, his unwillingness to place restrictions on Paul Robeson and Roland Hayes also implies that this is a mere recommendation, and not a restriction. The unique identity of the spiritual should not be compromised. Locke forbears discussing just what constitutes this identity. It is enough that he is aware of its existence, and that readers will know his meaning when he refers to it. There is no attempt made to see beyond the creation of this new art form – simply what any establishment of such an art form must contain.

Locke's use of the word "modernistic" slightly complicates matters. For was he using the term to refer to the contemporary musical movement, or was he simply referring to "contemporary" music as music that was concurrent with his own time? If the former (referring to "modern" music), this was the approach that was rejected by Still in his pursuit of an ideal mode of self-expression. If the latter, the scope immediately widens. The case might be made that Still failed Locke on this count as well, for the musical language that Still chose utilized a past idiom, not necessarily a contemporary one. However, for the spiritual (and jazz) elements to remain recognizable, the choice of a past semi-romantic musical idiom would seem almost unavoidable. Yet Locke's only mention of Still is as a protégé of Edgar Varese; he also speaks of

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 209.

Varese breaking down the “traditional choiring” of the orchestra “which stood against the opening up and development of the Negro and African idioms in the orchestral forms.”<sup>93</sup> Locke summarizes his hope that “Negro music very probably has a great contribution yet to make to the substance and style of contemporary music, both choral and instrumental.”<sup>94</sup> In his summary, Locke calls for a “broader appreciation of Negro folk song, and of the spiritual on which is the very kernel of this distinctive folk art.”

The article that Locke includes in *The New Negro* on jazz, written by J. A. Rogers, is altogether more circumspect. Jazz is presented as less artistic, and possibly less African-American, than the spirituals. As a genre, it is “too fundamentally human...to be typically racial, too international to be characteristically national, too much abroad in the world to have a special home.”<sup>95</sup> Though acknowledging and African-American influence, Rogers seems reluctant to claim jazz as a cornerstone of art equal to the spiritual. Jazz is a “release of all the suppressed emotions at once, a blowing off of the lid, as it were.”<sup>96</sup> With this statement, the line that has drawn between spirituals and jazz is revealed: jazz is the product of pure emotional release (which he views with faintly disguised disdain), while the spirituals are simply more characteristic of African-Americans in their stateliness and dignity. While Locke’s positions on both genres reveal as much or more about his view of the African-American race of which he was a part, the musical divide that he draws subjugates jazz to a less-dignified level. “Whatever the result of the attempt to raise jazz from the mob-level upon which it originated, its true home

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 217.

is still its original cradle, the none too respectable cabaret.”<sup>97</sup> Despite this, “...they are wise, who instead of protesting against it, try to lift and divert it into nobler channels.”<sup>98</sup> William Grant Still did exactly that—not necessarily because he sought to ennoble the genre, but possibly because he viewed it as just as musically viable as spirituals. The spiritual in *The New Negro* is presented as more characteristic of African-Americans, while jazz is more in line with the American spirit.

The only work of Still’s mentioned in *The New Negro* was *From the Land of Dreams* (1924, performed 1925)—a musically modern work, and one that Locke first heard performed at one of the Varese-organized concerts. “I have been following your work on every possible occasion and have heard two of the International Composers’ League programs,” Locke wrote to Still in the first extant letter of their correspondence, dated July 8, 1927. “You will notice your work listed in the music bibliography of the New Negro—and comment in passing in the essay on Negro Spirituals.”<sup>99</sup> The entire Still–Locke correspondence reveals not only how receptive Still was to proposals and suggestions concerning projects, but also that Still, though perhaps a little in awe of Locke, was not a “blind follower.” It is a tribute to the relationship Still had with Locke that both of them felt comfortable discussing philosophical questions of great import. Over the course of four years, a number of letters survive, though some of these are incomplete. A spate of letters concerning the ballet *Sahdji*, for which Locke had personally selected Still to compose the music, reveal little. Several letters from Still seemed to have gone unanswered. There are communications from 1928 to 1930 concerning the ballet, with no record of Locke

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>99</sup> Alain Locke to William Grant Still, 8 July 1927, William Grant Still Collection, Box 1.

replying, and in January 1931 Still began a letter to Locke with the words, “Greetings to, and good news for one who for some reason has remained silent.”<sup>100</sup>

Thus the exchange of ideas was not constant, though each missive is highly charged. The publication of Locke’s book *The Negro and His Music* occasioned a wonderful exchange between the two men, and indicates just how parallel their ideas were. Locke sent Still an advance copy of the book, saying, “Will be glad to know what you think of it; I have tried to do a conscientious job.”<sup>101</sup> Not only does this indicate that his relationship with Still was hardly master and student, or theologian versus musician, it indicates Locke’s desire to learn whether his expressions concerning African-American music communicate ideas that were parallel with a major African-American composer of the time—that he was not simply expressing opinion, but that he was also providing direction. Still’s reply was effusive: “The book is fine; I think you have produced a monograph that is much better than anything that has been done before on the same subject, and I am sure it will prove a valuable source of research to many people... [C]ongratulations on a fine piece of work!”<sup>102</sup>

Their mutual agreement on a number of points established, as it were, the correspondence assumes a more philosophical bent. Locke had occasion to hear Still’s *Symphony No. 2 in G minor*, and wrote to Still that “Just the point that Downes made about lack of formal symphonic development was to me the main virtue—for if we are to represent [the] Negro and for that matter modern life, there must be fresh and unexpected improvisation[al] movement not the

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<sup>100</sup> William Grant Still to Alain Locke, 24 January 1931, William Grant Still Collection, Box 1.

<sup>101</sup> Alain Locke to William Grant Still, 14 March 1937, William Grant Still Collection, Box 1.

<sup>102</sup> William Grant Still to Alain Locke, 22 March 1937, William Grant Still Collection, Box 1.

predictable steps and return re-tracings of traditional style.”<sup>103</sup> Later in the same letter Locke also remarks that “It is so strange that nowhere among Negro musicians do you find any really intellectual interest in new works and experimenting.” Thus the inclination towards modernism mentioned in *The New Negro* is here more fully described: representation of modern life via intellectual or experimental methods. Both stipulations are more in keeping with avant-garde ideals than with the audience-centric, musically “conservative” style that Still adhered to in his later years. Still does not whole-heartedly agree with Locke in this instance, either. Though ostensibly agreeing with Locke, saying “I thoroughly disapprove of following tradition,” he adds a qualification: “...just because it is the thing to do.”<sup>104</sup> Thus Still is returning to his standard of fusion, taking a stance similar to the one he took on modernist techniques. A composer should never be compelled to follow tradition, but should be aware of its use and possibilities.

What can be seen as a refusal to commit to any particular ideology was in fact a sign of larger principle that flows over and through much of Still’s beliefs on the subject of racial relations—and naturally, any compositions that were influenced by these beliefs. While conversing with Locke concerning the choral ballad *And They Lynched Him to a Tree*, Still observed,

Doesn’t it strike you as being significant—the increasing awareness of cultured people to the problems that confront all of us today? I am positive that there is growing a new brotherhood of man in these United States and that those few unenlightened people who dare to thwart the divine plan by hanging back, shouting prejudice and encouraging racial differences, will fall by the wayside. It may take a few generations to see a complete change, but these present occurrences make me sure that it will come eventually.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup>Alain Locke to William Grant Still, 20 December 1937, William Grant Still Collection, Box 1.

<sup>104</sup>William Grant Still to Alain Locke, 3 December 1937, William Grant Still Collection, Box 1.

<sup>105</sup>William Grant Still to Alain Locke, 18 August 1939, William Grant Still Collection, Box 1.

Part of this optimism was no doubt engendered by the support he received while working on the choral ballad. This excerpt also provides an example of how Still's belief in fusion alters an interpretive exploration of his speech. Rather than seeing himself and those of his race as fighting against a racial divide, what they were fighting was a feeling, an emotion (prejudice). The "problems that confront us" makes no mention of any divide based upon color. Even in discussing *And They Lynched Him to a Tree*, his language is racially neutral: "For a long time I've wished to add my voice to those that are now protesting against lynching"<sup>106</sup> protests the reprehensible act of lynching. That particular act was largely carried out against African-Americans, and Still's piece was composed with these events in mind.<sup>107</sup> But Still's own language is strangely non-committal; he was attempting to set the example, and be the world that he saw coming.

Still's ideals concerning the people of America went beyond just brotherhood, however. Writing to Locke as the crisis of the Second World War deepened in July of 1941, Still said,

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.<sup>108</sup>

This is the final affirmation of William Grant Still's development of his nationalistic ideal. From rejecting Varese's ideology to write music that was expressive of his race, Still now

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Wayne Shirley, "William Grant Still's Choral Ballad 'And They Lynched Him to A Tree'," *American Music* 12, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 425-461.

<sup>108</sup> William Grant Still to Alain Locke, 13 July 1941, William Grant Still Collection, Box 1.

affirms his belief that the race of which he was part would not remain a separate entity forever, that it would in fact disappear. It would not be absorbed into the “white” race; that might imply a subjugated belief in the dominance of that race. Instead, the belief in the creation of a new race indicates that Still saw the contributions of African-Americans as equal to the contributions of other tributary races: all would be equal participants in this race of people which would constitute a new entity, completely replacing the old. This also indicates that Still was not only conscious of the contribution that African-Americans would make to this new race, but that he was conscious other races within what had (and has) been loosely referred to as a “white” race. So not only would the African-American identity be subsumed into this amalgamation, but so also would any other race.

This statement of Still’s constitutes a statement of his world-view, by which I mean the lens through which he perceived not only his place in history, but what that history might be. It provides insight not only into how he viewed himself as an African-American composer, but also how he viewed himself as a nationalist. If as he predicted there would be an amalgamation of races, then his purpose in expressing his race had as its goal racial distinction in terms of accomplishment, not racial distinction as an expression of superiority. His contribution to music and art as a whole was to enable African-Americans to contribute as much as possible to the emerging race. Further, as he grew older, and he felt (or saw) this amalgamation growing closer, and his accomplishments and those of his contemporaries grew, he felt less need to overtly express his race, since who he was would make itself felt in his music, regardless of how he

chose to express himself. “I am sure my racial heritage [is] apparent,” Still wrote in 1955, “because it is a part of me, and whatever I am shows in the music I write.”<sup>109</sup>

The question of what Still thought constituted American music thus becomes much simpler and, at the same time, more difficult. On the one hand, if he were attempting to see music as a fusion of elements, can the product of this fusion be called American music? What if one element stands out more strongly than another (such as the racial element)? If one element is more dominant than another, does the dominance of that element supersede the idea of fusion? On the other hand, the American nationalism which Still sought to foster in his music after approximately 1935 assumes a simpler dimension: the America for which he was writing becomes an America in which the fusion of cultures has already occurred. “I have wanted to concentrate on writing *American* music [his italics], not only because this is our country and we are proud of it, but also because American musical idioms are so rich and so varied in their basic characteristics... America can truly be called the great ‘melting pot’...because it has absorbed the idioms of many different peoples.”<sup>110</sup> In essence, because of this, it lent itself to the very idea of fusion to which Still had committed himself. Still in fact saw himself as expanding outside the boundaries of the United States, and fusing the cultures of multiple continents: “...I have expanded this into a development of music of the entire Western Hemisphere—in short of the *Americas*, rather than just North America.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> William Grant Still and Verna Arvey, “Serious Music: New Field for the Negro,” *Variety*, Vol. 197, No. 5 (January 5, 1955), in *William Grant Still: Collected Articles* (Flagstaff, Arizona: The Master-Player Library, 2011), 37.

<sup>110</sup> William Grant Still “My Compositions” (originally untitled) (lecture, UCLA Medical Center, March 8, 1962), in *William Grant Still: Collected Speeches & Lectures*, 52.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

Still's positions concerning music (and by association his approach to nationalism) are tied to his choice of musical expression and respect for audience appreciation. One historian referred to Still as a "model of high/low versatility"<sup>112</sup> in reference to the fact that he composed "classical art works" like symphonies, and yet was able to appeal to a popular audience as well. Aesthetic prejudice from critics and colleagues sometimes manifested itself, not in discrimination, but as expectation. Olin Downes fell into this trap when his reviews indicated that he approved or disapproved of Still's music based upon whether it fulfilled Downes' expectation that music composed by an African-American should contain exotic folksong and popular rhythm.<sup>113</sup> Downes' relationship with Still is complicated by the fact that he was not in favor of the "modernist" procedures that Still was experimenting with in 1925. Another critic, Paul Rosenfeld, was more accepting of the new procedures, but as Carol Oja has noted, Rosenfeld viewed Still as not just another young, promising composer, but as something of curiosity because of his race.<sup>114</sup> Downes' expectation of folksong and Rosenfeld's curiosity categorization both place Still within the realm of exoticism which may not be overtly prejudicial, but still fails to accept every aspect of an entity for what it is worth (instead of what it is expected to be worth).

The problem that arises is that Still identified in part with Downes' position on the so-called modernist movement. For, as stated repeatedly in numerous articles and speeches, Still's outlook was decidedly anti-intellectual (not implying the term "intellectual" to mean actual

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<sup>112</sup> Joseph Horowitz, *Classical Music in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005) 469.

<sup>113</sup> See Catherine Parsons Smith, "'Harlem Renaissance Man' Revisited: The Politics of Race and Class in William Grant Still's Late Career," *American Music* 15, no. 3 (Autumn, 1997): 382; see also Carol J. Oja, "'New Music' and the 'New Negro': The Background of William Grant Still's 'Afro-American Symphony,'" *Black Music Research Journal* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 1992): 153.

<sup>114</sup> Oja, "'New Music' and the 'New Negro,'" 152.

intelligence, but referring to it as implying perceived erudition). Those who utilize the twelve-tone scale “have run [the market] into a dead end for all of us, by experimenting unduly and writing sounds instead of music.”<sup>115</sup> Two years after this speech he would go further and proclaim that “Experiments with music should be so labeled, and not confused with music.”<sup>116</sup> Immediately Still demonstrates his awareness of the marketability of his chosen pursuit. Still’s view of the act of composing and the purpose that it served was decidedly audience-centric:

In the industrial field, according to Henry Dreyfuss, if a product does not sell half-a-million copies, it is discarded because it won’t pay for the machinery to manufacture it. Perhaps you may say that this is a commercial attitude that should not be applied to music. Yet music should be like any other product in the sense that it *must* [his italics] fill an audience’s need, or else it is useless.<sup>117</sup>

Utilizing commercialization as a compositional motivation provides a clue to Still’s view of the music that he produced. Does he then view music as a commodity? If composing for the pleasure of the audience equals valuing the music as less than art, then yes. However, composing for the pleasure of the audience Still regards as a *part* of the art, not as something that contaminates it. The attempt to break free of audience-centrism by other contemporary composers (who he references by inference but never names) is clearly a movement that he did not understand, and there are indications that he never understood. Further, Still condemned the idea of writing overly simple music as an insult, a way of patronizing the audience—and perhaps

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<sup>115</sup> William Grant Still, “The Audience as Participant” (Speech, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization[UNESCO], Denver Conference, September 30, 1959, in *William Grant Still: Collected Speeches & Lectures*, 32.

<sup>116</sup> William Grant Still, “The Composer’s Creed” (Speech, Music Teachers’ Association of California, Merrill Hall, Silomar Conference Center, Pacific Grove, California, July 16-20, 1961), in *William Grant Still: Collected Speeches & Lectures*, 43.

<sup>117</sup> William Grant Still, “The Audience as Participant” (Speech, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization[UNESCO], Denver Conference, September 30, 1959, in *William Grant Still: Collected Speeches & Lectures*, 31.

indicative of the snobbery that he felt was inherent in several composers of his time. Writing for an audience's *spontaneous response* should not be a limitation on the composer, but it should also "...not be a limitation for the composer; it should be a challenge. To be able to reach an audience without 'writing down' and without becoming cheap should be the goal of everyone in the creative field, for a composer fails to do his duty to the development of music when he writes down to his hearers, nor does he edify, uplift, please or complement those hearers when he does so."<sup>118</sup> Indeed, Milton Babbitt's now-famous 1958 article "Who Cares if You Listen?" can be seen as the anti-thesis of Still's aesthetic position, for Still cared very much for what his audience wanted to hear. Catherine Parsons Smith has argued that Still was largely isolated in his later years from the leading thought (both racial and musical) of his day.<sup>119</sup> Still (and currently his daughter, Judith Anne Still<sup>120</sup>) did not view this as separation, but rather as a spectatorship. In 1961 he observed,

For more than the past quarter of a century, I have been living and working on the West Coast, far away from New York, which is generally considered the center of creative activity. In that sense, I have felt no compulsion to follow the leader in my work. And in a way, I have felt almost like a member of the audience, one in whom other listeners have frequently confided.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> William Grant Still, "Horizons Unlimited," in Robert Bartlett Haas, ed., *William Grant Still and the Fusion of Cultures in American Music* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1972), 117.

<sup>119</sup> Catherine Parsons Smith has argued this in several places; *A Study in Contradictions*, 173, is as clear as any.

<sup>120</sup> "As for Smith's rank contention that the couple was isolated, friendless, out-of-touch with society, unregarded, and unloved, there is no falsehood of hers that is less provable and less likely." Judith Anne Still, "Commentary on Catherine Parsons Smith's 'William Grant Still'," William Grant Still Music and The Master-Player Library, <http://www.williamgrantstill.com/nss-folder/catherineparsonsmith/SmithCommentary.pdf> (accessed February 10, 2012).

<sup>121</sup> William Grant Still, "Contemporary Music and the Audiences of Today" (Speech, South Bay Music Teachers' Association, May 7, 1961), in *William Grant Still: Collected Speeches & Lectures*, 42.

Thus not only did Still write for the audience, but he realized that he himself was a part of the audience. This makes the music that Still wrote the ultimate self-expression, for through his attempt to write for the audience, Still was also writing for himself.

From the question of nationalism and audience-centrism, it is only one small step to the hotly discussed topic of William Grant Still's musical purpose. "In any discussion of the requirements of American music, I think we have the right, first of all, to demand that it be music..."<sup>122</sup> Still observed in 1948—a completely unveiled jab at those composers who he felt were composing that was only appealing as a cerebral exercise, and therefore did not qualify as "music" at all. Musical comprehension was more important to Still than musical complexity. He wrote a review of *Understanding Music* by William S. Newman in 1953 entitled "Man Has the Right to Like the Music He Likes."<sup>123</sup> Further, in an article for the American Symphony Orchestra League Newsletter in 1954, Still writes that "In a climate of internationalism, American culture has gone backward instead of forward during the last twenty-five years."<sup>124</sup> By internationalism, Still is again making a veiled reference to the "modern" school of composition, which he views as imported from Europe. All this indicates Still believed that national boundaries should remain firmly drawn; that slapping an American title on a modern piece did not make it American. He remained in staunch defense of an approachable musical idiom so frequently associated with Romanticism. His goal, as stated in 1945,<sup>125</sup> was the complete

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<sup>122</sup> William Grant Still, "American Music and the Well-timed Sneer," *Opera and Concert*, Vol. XIII, No. 5 (May 1948), in *William Grant Still: Collected Articles*, 31.

<sup>123</sup> *William Grant Still: Collected Articles*, 33.

<sup>124</sup> William Grant Still, "Toward a Broader American Culture." *American Symphony Orchestra League Newsletter*, Vol. VI, No. 1 (July 1954), in *William Grant Still: Collected Articles*, 34.

<sup>125</sup> William Grant Still as told to Verna Arvey, "The King is Dead—Long Live the King!" *Stadium Concerts Review* XXVIII, No. 2 (June/July, 1945), in *William Grant Still: Collected Articles*, 23.

democratization of music. There is no larger declaration than the statement that the public is king and is the only suitable judge of what will be remembered in posterity—for the public is posterity.<sup>126</sup>

One example of Still's particular brand of "new" nationalism would be his *Symphony No. 4*, subtitled "Autochthonous." The subtitle alone immediately hints at its nationalistic purpose,<sup>127</sup> because the primary definition of autochthonous is "indigenous or native." A secondary meaning provides greater insight: "Originating where found; indigenous; native."<sup>128</sup> The first definition, with its use of the ethnic terms "indigenous" and "native," implies some kind of content derived from these sources. Still's intention, however, is not rooted in *taking from* an existing culture, but in *giving expression to* a culture. It is the second definition that provides the greatest clue to Still's use of this term. Some dictionaries phrase the definition differently, but the substance is the same. The *American Heritage Dictionary* says, as stated above, "Originating where found." *Merriam Webster* states, "formed or originating the place where found." Immediately the question is shifted from an occupier of place to the place itself, or rather the assignment of place. If dealing with assignment of place, the reason for making such an assignment was usually to ascribe or evoke some of the attributes of the place in the music; such techniques had sought to exoticize a variety of locales. But the difference with an autochthonous work is that it is *not* transplanted. Its origin is where it is found. This is more indicative, not of something cultural, which can consist of many influences (all or none of which may originate where the culture is discovered), nor of something racial, which may thrive in a place far from its

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<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>127</sup> This was the last of the composer's five symphonies, as Symphony No. 5 was actually composed earlier, withdrawn, then edited, published and performed at a subsequent date.

<sup>128</sup> *American Heritage Dictionary*, 59.

origin. Instead, something more ephemeral and less tangible is being referenced: something more akin to emotion or feeling (both being central tenets of Still's audience-centric view of his duty as a composer). Still observed, "As the subtitle indicates, the *Fourth Symphony* has its roots in our own soil, but rather than being aboriginal or indigenous, it is intended to represent the spirit of the American people,"<sup>129</sup> a spirit that is rooted and fostered in a sense of the place of its discovery, not the race in which it resides. A more perfect example of the progression of Still's compositional ideologies could not be imagined, especially one that demonstrates the change from expressing the emotions of African-Americans to expressing the emotions of all Americans. The question of fusion is not left in doubt either, for he and Verna wrote in the program notes that "the music speaks of the fusion of musical cultures in North America." Thus the place of origin, the repository for the spirit that the composer sought to encapsulate, was larger than even America; which implies that, after the composition of the *Autochthonous Symphony* at least, Still's use of the term "American" denotes far more than a country.

Just as importantly, Still's world-view also brings into question previous nationalistic associations. The view of the composer as a "Harlem Renaissance composer on intellectual and stylistic bases"<sup>130</sup> seems reasonable in light of his association with Alain Locke, and serves to vitalize Still's musical output by association with a large societal movement. However, it ignores positions the composer took on race and brotherhood (and, by implication, nationhood) as

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<sup>129</sup> David Ciucevich, Jr., 2009, liner note to *William Grant Still: Symphonies Nos. 4 and 5*, Naxos 8.559603. While a program was supplied after the completion of the music, Still was quite clear that the *Autochthonous Symphony* was intended to symbolize the American Spirit from the outset. See Paul Harold Slattery, "A Discussion of the *Fourth Symphony* including comparisons with the *First Symphony*," in *William Grant Still and the Fusion of Cultures in American Music*, 41.

<sup>130</sup> Murchison, "'Dean of Afro-American Composers' or 'Harlem Renaissance Man,'" 54.

already discussed. Still's own position on music as a part of the Harlem Renaissance was clearly affirmed in an interview in 1967 with R. Donald Brown:

Brown: "At the time, when you were in New York, what was your attitude toward the "Harlem Renaissance" or "The New Negro Movement"? And, were you a conscious participant?"

Still: "No, I wasn't. I was totally preoccupied with music. I had no interest in it, nor any part in anything of that sort."

Brown: "Of course, later you did collaborate, didn't you, with Langston Hughes?"

Still: "Yes I did, later on, [collaborate] with Langston. [But] my thoughts were all bent on achieving my [own] ambition, and that necessitated a great deal of study and preparation."<sup>131</sup>

The conversation subsequently turned to whether there had been a specifically musical aspect to the Harlem Renaissance; Still does not claim knowledge of the movement, but does state that he was not aware of any decided change in his or any other African-American composers' approach to writing music.

Still denies any musical involvement with the Harlem Renaissance because in his mind there was no specifically musical aspect of the Renaissance. Perhaps this indicates that he subscribed to the view of the Renaissance as a strictly literary movement. Associating with the literary figures, collaborating with them, and exchanging ideas with them was apparently not enough. From his numerous writings and speeches, Still was clearly not blind to the ideologies at work in the social movement. However, collaborating with these major literary figures on a musical project did not constitute a Harlem Renaissance style of composition. Thus Still was taking an extremely literal view of the appellation of the term and idea of style—and, as the above statement indicates, he thought himself more concerned with his own projects and ambitions than with contributing to the expansion and development of the Harlem Renaissance.

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<sup>131</sup> William Grant Still, interview by R. Donald Brown, *Oral History Program, California Black Oral History Project*, University of California Fullerton, November 13, 1967), in *William Grant Still: An Oral History*, 23.

Perhaps this was because, from the earliest days of his career as a composer, arranger, and musician, he had “been in on the ground floor” of attempting to establish and elevate music to a new height—beginning musically with his “apprenticeship” to W. C. Handy in 1915, though tenets were instilled by his mother, Carrie Still Shepperson, long before that. It was something that had always been a part of Still’s musical ethic, which the advent of the Harlem Renaissance did not change.

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

There was a moment of conscious progression when the Harlem Renaissance became, not passé, but something of the past. “Because the movement itself was an abstract concept, based on personal commitments and loyalties rather than on a single identifiable person or institution, it is difficult to pinpoint the moment of its death.”<sup>132</sup> Some participants consciously dissociated themselves from the movement; for others, financial hardship of the Depression forced them to seek income elsewhere, further weakening the movement. Langston Hughes, speaking of the end of 1930 and the beginning of 1931, said, “That spring for me (and, I guess, for all of us) was the end of the Harlem Renaissance. We were no longer in vogue, anyway, we Negroes. Sophisticated New Yorkers turned to Noel Coward. Colored actors began to go hungry, publishers politely rejected new manuscripts, and patrons found other uses for their money. The cycle that had charlestoned into being on the dancing heels of *Shuffle Along* now ended in *Green Pastures* with De Lawd.”<sup>133</sup>

Like other figures of the Harlem Renaissance, William Grant Still adjusted his creative approach in the wake of the movement’s passing. Instead of remaining confined to race music, he began to view himself as more a nationalist composer than as one ethnically African-

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<sup>132</sup> Cary D. Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, 217.

<sup>133</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (1940; New York: Persea Books, 1986), 334.

American. This point of view originated in several African-American philosophers of the time (and, in Still's case, in Alain Locke). Still took this idea of national pride and extrapolated a different purpose for his work in the Harlem Renaissance: that all his work—and the work of his contemporaries—was portending towards an amalgamation of race. Like his music, which represented a fusion of a variety of elements, Still foresaw a fusion of races, and the emergence of a new identity. This singular identity, which he believed would embody a new America, was what he sought to capture in his music; this was the spirit in which he engaged in the nationalist discussion.

Still's relationship with contemporary African-American leaders did undergo much change. He greatly disagreed with some of the paths which they chose—though again, ever courteous, Still rarely names anyone. Instead he deplors the purport these actions might have on African-American and White American relations. In 1969 he observed,

...make no mistake about it: segregation today is illegal because these of who came before fought a legal battle against it and struggled to gain our rights as American citizens—this, during a period when our opportunities were so far less than those of today. We didn't waste time and energy returning hatred for hatred. Instead, we continued moving toward our goal, never forgetting that our progress was being hastened because of the help given us by many fine, White Americans. We won the battle with *their* help.<sup>134</sup> (Still's italics)

Within Still's theory of fusion, it is simply common sense that it would be impossible to join with another race if either were possessed of retaliatory hate. It is not surprising, then, that his stance towards "black militants" was surprised and incredulous. While demonstrating pride in being African-American, their activities were, he felt, driving the wedge deeper between African-American and other races.

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<sup>134</sup> William Grant Still, "The History and Future of Black-American Music Studies: Practices and Potentials" (speech, Indiana University Seminar on Black Music, June 21, 1969), in *William Grant Still: Speeches and Lectures*, 116.

Twice I have had encounters with the so-called “Black” militants, both unpleasant. The first came during a discussion on racial matters, the second during a discussion on musical matters. As I am now seventy-four years of age and have been a Negro for all of the seventy-four years, I did not need people fifty years my junior telling what it is, or should be, to be a Negro. I was impressed with their insincerity and convinced of their hypocrisy, not to mention their stupidity and ignorance. I was more than ever determined to follow my own leaning toward integration rather than segregation... For I am convinced that we *all* must work *together* harmoniously.<sup>135</sup> (Still’s emphasis)

Referring to those who advocated a renewed segregation (or, under the more contemporary terminology, separatism), Still simply said, “...they ought to have their heads examined.”<sup>136</sup>

Even in the face of new directions from the new generation of African-American leaders, Still held to the beliefs he had enunciated in his correspondence with Alain Locke.

Still would fight to overcome several other barriers in the remainder of his career as he composed music that sought to aid in making this vision a reality. Questions concerning his use of a predominantly tonal musical language would arise from composers of the avant-garde. Still’s audience-centric purpose in his compositions would be criticized by the same crowd as demeaning the art. In defense Still went so far as to imply that “modernist” music is not music at all, for he observes that “in any discussion of the requirements of American music, I think we have the right, first of all, to demand that it be music...”<sup>137</sup> Further, in an article for the American Symphony Orchestra League Newsletter in 1954, Still writes that “In a climate of internationalism, American culture has gone backward instead of forward during the last twenty-five years.”<sup>138</sup> He remained in staunch defense of an approachable musical idiom so frequently

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>137</sup> William Grant Still, “American Music and the Well-timed Sneer,” *Opera and Concert*, Vol. XIII, No. 5 (May 1948), in *William Grant Still: Collected Articles*, 31.

<sup>138</sup> William Grant Still, “Towards a Broader American Culture” (speech, American Symphony Orchestra League Convention, Springfield Ohio, June 17, 1954), in *William Grant Still: Collected Articles*, 34.

associated with Romanticism. His goal, as stated in 1945,<sup>139</sup> was the complete democratization of music, "...as Mr. Stokowski so aptly says, 'Music for all of us'." William Grant Still's compositional ethic, as it developed and manifested itself in this time, speaks of a new national identity, one that is rooted in a brotherhood of races and ideals. The influence of such a concept, in Still's eyes, extends beyond the borders of any single country in the Western Hemisphere, and no doubt overcomes any geographical boundaries created by man. When William Grant Still's positions on music are considered together with the music that he produced, he appears as more than just "the Dean of Afro-American Composers." His music becomes an embodiment of that hope for a brighter future that is shared by so many people. Dr. Still sought to use his music as a mirror, but not one that reflects the reality around the viewer. Instead, it shows a better future in its reflection, one that is hoped for but not yet realized. It is through this ideal that William Grant Still provided a picture of what he thought America could be. His progression from "racial" music to a broad nationalism demonstrates how he arrived at this ideal, and provides a new window through which to consider his music.

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<sup>139</sup> William Grant Still as told to Verna Arvey, "The King is Dead—Long Live the King," *Stadium Concerts Review*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 2 (June-July, 1945), in *William Grant Still: Collected Articles*, 23.

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