William Grant Still Exhibition

Biography & Major Works

Born in Woodville, Mississippi, and reared in Little Rock, Arkansas, William Grant Still (1895-1978) became the first African American composer to have a symphony performed by an American orchestra. Mr. Still's *Afro-American Symphony* was premiered by the Eastman Rochester Philharmonic with Howard Hanson in 1931. The symphony was performed by 34 other American and European orchestras during the 1930s.

Still would continue to add to his list of firsts, being the first African American to conduct a major symphony orchestra, the first African American to have an opera (*Troubled Island*) performed by a major opera company (1949), and the first to have an opera (*A Bayou Legend*) performed on national television (1981). The period from 1926 to the early 1940s was Still's most prolific; during this time he wrote *Levee Land* (1925), a suite for orchestra and soprano that combines traditional western musical elements with jazz; *From the Black Belt* (1926), a work for chamber orchestra based on seven short characteristic sketches; *Sahdji* (1930), a choral ballet, based on an African story; the *Afro-American Symphony* (1931), his most popular work; *Lenox Avenue* (1936), a ballet depicting life in Harlem; and his opera *Troubled Island* (1941), about the Haitian slave rebellion and consequent troubles of their leader Jean Jacques Dessalines. During the 1950s Still turned to writing for young audiences. This period includes *The Little Song That Wanted to Be a Symphony* (1954), the *Little Red Schoolhouse* (1957), *The American Scene* (1957), which is a set of five descriptive suites for young Americans based on geographic regions of the country, and various songs and arrangements written for children's music text books.