

Soluna Festival: Still, Martin, Beethoven

by René Spencer Saller

Dean's List

Nicknamed the "Dean of African-American composers," William Grant Still completed more than 150 works, including eight operas and five symphonies. In 1935 he became the first African American person to write a symphony that was performed by a major orchestra; the next year he was the first to conduct a major orchestra. In 1949, his opera about Haiti, *Troubled Island*, was produced by the New York City Opera—another historic first.

Still was born on May 11, 1895, in Woodville, Mississippi, to college-educated teachers. His father, who was also the town bandmaster, died when Still was three months old. He and his mother moved to Little Rock, Arkansas, where she remarried. He began taking violin lessons at age 14 and taught himself viola, cello, double bass, clarinet, oboe, and saxophone. In 1911 he enrolled at Wilberforce College in Ohio, where he directed the band. His studies at Oberlin Conservatory of Music were interrupted by his Navy service. He played as a sideman for bluesman W.C. Handy, who brought him to Memphis and then New York City, where he became an oboist in Eubie Blake's pit band as well as a successful arranger for theater orchestras and jazz and blues artists. He also studied with the influential atonalist Edgard Varèse.

In 1931 Howard Hanson conducted Still's Symphony No. 1 (*Afro-American*), and the 36-year-old composer's career took off, with commissions from several orchestras. In 1934 Still received a Guggenheim Fellowship and moved to Los Angeles, where he arranged film scores and popular music while honing his own powerful musical idiom: a blend of European post-Romanticism, jazz, blues, and spirituals.

Composed in 1944 for the Cleveland Orchestra, *Poem for Orchestra* exemplifies Still's singular style. Moving from turbulent dissonance to sensuous lyricism, it concludes with a hopeful but ambiguous chord. According to his wife, Verna Arvey, Still was "inspired by the concept of a world being reborn spiritually after a period of darkness and desolation."

Late Bloomer

Frank Martin was born in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1890, the last of ten children fathered by a Calvinist minister. Although he began composing music at eight, he never attended conservatory, opting instead to fulfill his parents' wishes and study math and physics. He couldn't suppress his love of music, though, and he took private lessons in piano, harmony, and composition. In 1918, his countryman Ernest Ansermet conducted the premiere of Martin's choral work *Les dithyrambs*. After living in Zurich, Rome, and Paris, Martin returned to Geneva in 1926, where he taught improvisation and rhythm and founded a chamber-music society. Starting in the early 1930s, he gravitated to 12-tone composition, which he eventually adapted to create an original style.

"I had found with Schoenberg an iron jacket, from which I took only that which suited me, that which allowed me to fashion my true manner of writing," Martin wrote. "And I can say that my most personal output begins around the age of 50. If I had died then, I could never have expressed myself in my true language."

Composed in 1949, the Concerto for Wind Instruments, Percussion, and String Orchestra embodies Martin's passion for unexpected instrumental combinations. A jazzy nod to the Baroque concerto grosso, it features a small group of soloists set off against a larger ensemble. The opening Allegro starts with strings alone and then offers oboe and clarinet solos; a trio for horn, trumpet, and trombone; and a duet for flute and oboe. A tender bassoon ushers in some brief solo passages, followed by a slightly altered reprise of the earlier theme. In the central Adagietto, a moody violin melody, accompanied by an ostinato pattern in the lower strings, precedes a sequence of solos. A bassoon sings a high, haunting tune that leads to a tumultuous interlude. The movement ends with the trombone's interpretation of the strange bassoon tune, which now sounds less fretful. The closing Allegro vivace presents a dazzling array of solos (including some particularly memorable turns by the timpani and the horn) before culminating in a frenetic coda.

Restless Iconoclast

Ludwig van Beethoven's Seventh Symphony may seem like a spontaneous expression of joy, a universally beloved celebration of love and freedom, but it is also a groundbreaking, iconoclastic work. Although audiences went wild at the 1813 premiere, which took place more than a year after Beethoven finished the symphony, many of his peers were appalled. The pianist, teacher, and critic Friedrich Wieck, who attended the rehearsals, reported that everyone present believed that Beethoven must have composed it while drunk. For Carl Maria von Weber, the incessant droning bass line in the first movement's coda suggested that its creator was "ripe for the madhouse." Even today, music writers marvel over the innovative approach to key relationships, the way the work shifts from its home key of A major to far-flung C major and F major, rather than the expected dominant (E major). As Phillip Huscher writes, "We don't need a course in harmony to recognize that Beethoven has taken us through the looking glass, and that everything is turned on its head."

The first movement starts slowly and majestically, a much longer introduction than was usual for Beethoven. This Poco sostenuto interlude maps out the tonal terrain, preparing us for the aforementioned shifts in key. After 61 repeated E notes, the tempo transitions to Vivace, and the relentless driving rhythms, reminiscent of peasant dances, generate a flurry of swift dynamic changes and sudden modulations.

The second movement, in A minor, is marked Allegretto, but it's slow compared with the pell-mell rush of the other movements. The most famous part of the symphony, the Allegretto begins with an unsettling chord carried by the woodwinds and horns,

which ushers in a solemn march led by the violas, cellos, and double basses.

Borrowing a theme from an Austrian folk song, the third movement contrasts a lively scherzo in F major with a trio in D major, which starts off deceptively placid and gradually becomes more emphatic.

The finale opens with two fortissimo chords and restores the home key in a frenzy of forward momentum.

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