

“Danse Negre” from *African Suite*, Op. 35
– Samuel Coleridge Taylor

Born August 15, 1875, in Holborn, London, England
Died September 1, 1912, in Croydon, Surrey, England

Samuel Coleridge Taylor, known to his family simply as Coleridge, was born in suburban London to Alice Martin, the daughter of a blacksmith. His father, Dr. Daniel Peter Hughes Taylor, was a surgeon from Sierra Leone who returned to Africa before Coleridge was born. The child was raised by his mother and her father, Benjamin Holmans, who was also a violinist.

In the 1880s, a single English mother with a mixed-race child was destined to a meager existence. Economic conditions were difficult for the family, but she soon married George William Evans and life became easier. Coleridge moved on from violin lessons with his grandfather to studies with Joseph Beckwith. He also sang in the choir of St. George Presbyterian Church under Herbert Walters, a friend of George Grove who accepted the fifteen-year-old Coleridge to the Royal College of Music. In his second year, he changed his major from violin to composition and studied with the legendary Charles Villiers Stanford. It was under Stanford’s supervision that Taylor composed his most famous work, *Hiawatha’s Wedding Feast*, based on a poem by Longfellow.

The artistic turning point of Samuel Coleridge Taylor’s career happened when he met the African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. Taylor was about twenty years of age at the time and the two were soon collaborating on musical projects. Dunbar influenced the young composer to concentrate on his African heritage. London performances of spirituals by the Fisk Jubilee Singers cemented his focus.

It was under Dunbar’s influence that Taylor composed his *African Suite* for piano in 1898. The composer orchestrated the work shortly thereafter. The four movements depict different elements of the African experience, but the finale, “Danse Negre,” is the most familiar. The work begins with two introductory chords and proceeds with a rhythmic and angular melody. A festive second theme appears and is followed by a short development section. A graceful, almost dainty theme appears before the return of all previous material in an exciting coda.

***Afro-American Symphony* (Symphony No. 1)**
– William Grant Still

Born May 11, 1895, in Woodville, Mississippi
Died December 3, 1978, Los Angeles, California

Often called “the Dean of American Negro Composers,” as was the accepted term in his day, William Grant Still enjoyed a career that was unparalleled. As a child in Little Rock, he studied the violin and listened to his mother’s opera records. After attending college at Wilberforce University and the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, both in Ohio, he moved to New York and became active in popular music. There he worked with the leading performers of the day and, because of the multi-cultural diversity of the business, encountered very little in the way of racial oppression. Among those utilizing Still’s arranging talents were Benny Goodman and W. C. Handy, known to all as “Father of the Blues.” He soon enrolled in Boston’s New England Conservatory to study with illustrious composers George Chadwick and Edgard Varese. His meteoric rise as a composer led him from the east coast in the 1920s to Hollywood in the 1930s.

While in Los Angeles, he composed for films (*Lost Horizon*, *Pennies from Heaven*, and *Stormy Weather* among others) and, later, television (among his credits was music for the series *Gunsmoke*). However, the vast majority of his music for these media was considered as “stock music” and was uncredited. In 1930 he completed what many believe to be his crowning achievement in instrumental music – the *Afro-American Symphony*. After this work was premiered, Still’s career began to flourish, eventually producing eight operas from 1934 to 1955. His music lost much of its popularity in the 1950s and 1960s, but the 1970s saw a resurgence of interest in the work of this musical giant.

William Grant Still once said of the *Afro-American Symphony*, “I knew I wanted to write a symphony; I knew that it had to be an American work; and I wanted to demonstrate how the blues, so often considered a lowly expression, could be elevated to the highest musical level.” Rejecting spirituals as source material for the work in favor of blues, Still wrote in a sketchbook, “They, unlike many spirituals, do not exhibit the influence of Caucasian music.” Although he experienced little of the racial prejudice that affected so many African-American artists of the day, Still was attuned to the plight of his people. He wanted the work to be truly *Afro-American*.

The Symphony found its inspiration in the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, the Ohio-born writer who was the son of former slaves. As described by the archives of his work maintained at the University of Dayton, his verses use both “the standard English of the classical poet and the evocative dialect of the turn-of-the-century black community in America.” In other words, his poetry resided in the same segregated world in which he lived. Dunbar’s work often addressed the difficulties encountered by African-American people and their efforts to achieve equality in America. By using dialect, he was able to show the troubles of turn-of-the-century African-Americans in their own words, thereby elevating them to the highest level. Still and Dunbar were kindred spirits.

For the first movement, Still adheres to traditional sonata-allegro form, but the two principal themes are derived from the blues. In as pure of a blues as symphonic music will allow, each melody is built upon three four-bar phrases and follows the twelve-bar progression using three basic chords. After stating both themes, Still develops them using traditional European methods, just as Beethoven or Schumann would have done. The result is a convincing synthesis of two styles of music (and two worlds) that were not so distantly separated.

The second movement is also based on the blues idiom, this time poignant and filled with longing. It represents, in Still’s words, “the fervent prayers of a burdened people rising upward to God.” Still’s third movement adheres to the symphonic standard by using a dance-based form. In this case there is no regimented minuet or scherzo, but one of local Southern traditions. The jazz-tinged melodies are ever-present.

Still’s touching finale is drawn from Paul Laurence Dunbar’s empowering lines:

"Be proud, my Race, in mind and soul.
Thy name is writ on Glory's scroll
In characters of fire.
High mid the clouds of Fame's bright sky
Thy banners blazoned folds now fly,
And truth shall lift them higher."

Using a similar approach Still reflects the rising hope and fervor of the poem in his orchestral writing. The work ends in a blaze of orchestration that is at the same time captivating and heartfelt.

Porgy and Bess: A Symphonic Picture
- George Gershwin

Born Jacob Gershovitz on December 26, 1898, in Brooklyn, New York
Died on July 11, 1937 in Hollywood, California

George Gershwin was a first generation American of Russian-Jewish parents. By his late teens, he had learned the piano and became a “song-plugger” in New York’s Tin Pan Alley - the area where the popular music publishing trade was centered. Gershwin would sit at the piano in the Remick showroom playing the latest sheet music for customers. From this experience, he became keenly aware of popular musical styles and began to compose his own songs, often with his younger brother, Ira, as lyricist. Over the course of only eight years, the Gershwins became established as the leading creative team on Broadway. It was this background that George Gershwin brought with him when he decided to write works for the concert hall. Beginning with a grand experiment in 1924 that brought the world the *Rhapsody in Blue* as a work in the jazz idiom, but for the concert hall (originally for piano solo with a jazz band with added violins).

Many consider Gershwin’s greatest work to be the opera *Porgy and Bess*. Written between 1933 and 1935, the story of the work’s origin began in 1926 when the novel *Porgy* by DuBose Heyward came to Gershwin’s attention. Set in the tenements of Charleston, South Carolina, the book includes realistic portrayals of the African-American inhabitants of the neighborhood. The opera was staged on Broadway where it would be guaranteed more performances than at the Metropolitan Opera. The performances were idolized by audiences, but panned by critics, resulting in it closing after just 124 performances over just three months. Since then, it has been produced in nearly all of the world’s leading opera houses and has enjoyed seven revivals on Broadway.

Robert Russell Bennett arranged two suites of music from the opera and Gershwin compiled his own suite in 1936, entitled *Catfish Row*. Bennett’s most popular suite is called *Porgy and Bess: A Symphonic Picture*. Written in 1942 at the request of Fritz Reiner, conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, it is cinematic in its scope.

Although the arrangement does not follow the chronology of the opera, it is organized for maximum emotional impact.

It opens with the street vendor music as the city awakens after a hurricane. This leads to the requiem scene from Act III. Bennett returns to the opera’s opening followed by the famous lullaby, “Summertime.” “I Got Plenty O’ Nuttin’” comes next and leads into the vicious hurricane music. The love duet “Bess You Is My Woman Now” proceeds to the rousing picnic music entitled “Oh, I Can’t Sit Down.” Sportin’ Life’s jaunty “There’s a Boat Dat’s Leavin’ Soon for New York” is next leading to and Porgy’s “Oh Lawd I’m On My Way.”