



Musical Heroes: Stories of African-American Composers

William Grant Still (1895-1978)

Suggested Recordings, Resources, and Topics for Classroom Discussion

Recordings

Symphony No.1 in A-flat Major, *Afro-American*

Cincinnati Philharmonic Orchestra; Jindong Cai, conductor

https://open.spotify.com/album/6rdwANPRPpqL1GqBFqOk23?si=r72wp_O5SGOtGCdfD8KE_w&dl_branch=1

Symphony No.1 in A-flat Major, *Afro-American*

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra; Karl Krueger, conductor

<https://music.apple.com/us/album/still-symphony-no-1-in-a-flat-major-afro-american/1502765113>

***Africa* (Symphonic Poem)**

American Symphony Orchestra; Leon Botstein, conductor

https://open.spotify.com/album/2spqCgw0JSPX2dxrwowFKW?si=MM9b4gr0QFudK2KTjO5EHA&dl_branch=1

Symphony No. 2 in G minor, *Song of a New Race*

American Symphony Orchestra; Leon Botstein, conductor

https://open.spotify.com/album/4dl2MPw883cdwnfyURvaXN?si=EX8jPADFRWu2ODulpRGg9g&dl_branch=1

Symphony No. 2 in G minor, *Song of a New Race*

Detroit Symphony Orchestra; Neeme Jarvi, conductor

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pNM7nWuc5U> (Note: YouTube clips often contain ads.)

Additional Resources

Book: [In One Lifetime: A Biography of William Grant Still](#)

Website: <http://www.williamgrantstillmusic.com/>

Upcoming San Francisco Symphony performances:

William Grant Still Suite for Violin and Piano

Wednesday, April 13, 2022 at 7:30pm

Randall Goosby, violin; Zhu Wang, piano

<https://www.sfsymphony.org/Buy-Tickets/2021-22/SPOTLIGHT-SERIES-RANDALL>

Topics for classroom discussion, further research, and discovery

- African-American folk traditions: Spirituals
- Harlem Renaissance
- Operas by African-American composers

African-American folk traditions: Spirituals

- What are Spirituals? What are the origins of the African-American spiritual? Why were they created and sung?
- Study the lyrics (words) of a well-known spiritual such “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” What do the lyrics mean? Examine the lyrics for metaphors which may be coded messages about hope and freedom; research the double meanings of the words and phrases.
- How would you describe the musical style of spirituals?

Harlem Renaissance

- What was the Harlem Renaissance? What factors led to the creation of this African-American cultural movement? What was its historical and cultural significance?
- Research and summarize the achievements of some Harlem Renaissance luminaries:
 - writers Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston
 - visual artists Romare Bearden, Sargent Johnson
 - musicians Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong

Operas by African-American composers

Select an opera from the list below for further exploration.

Scott Joplin - *Treemonisha* (1911)

Shirley Graham DuBois - *Tom-Tom* (1932)

William Grant Still - *Highway 1, USA* (1963)

Anthony Davis - *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* (1985)

Anthony Davis - *The Central Park Five* (2019)

Terence Blanchard - *Fire in My Bones* (2019)

- What is the storyline of the opera? What cultural, historical, or social elements are reflected in the opera? What might have made the story attractive to an African-American composer?
- Identify universal themes (such as hope, fear, love, mourning, joy, etc.) in the opera. What message might the opera convey to today’s audiences?
- How would you describe the musical style of the opera?