



Features

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In and Out of the Mainstream

BARRY SINGER looks at the careers of Samuel Barber and William Grant Still, two composers whose work reflected the ever-changing path of twentieth-century American music.



William Grant Still and Samuel Barber

Samuel Barber's debut opera, *Vanessa*, followed William Grant Still's debut opera, *Troubled Island*, by less than a decade. Both were hard-won labors of love that each composer initiated without a commission and ultimately brought to fruition on the strength of his own tenacity. Both operas were hits with their opening-night audiences - *Vanessa* at the Met, *Troubled Island* at New York City Opera's then-City Center home. Both, nonetheless, soon disappeared

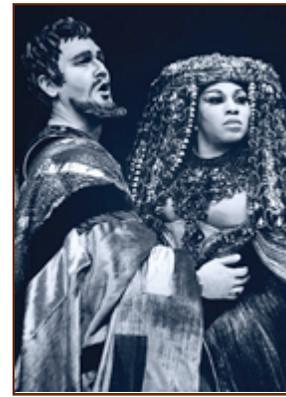
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from the active repertory. In the 1990s, *Vanessa* would be restored to a respected place in opera, a rebirth that Barber did not live to witness. For Still's *Troubled Island*, though, resurrection has never really come.

As the centennial of Barber's birth approaches, it is intriguing to view him through the contrasting prism of William Grant Still. In many senses, no American composer of the twentieth century contrasts with Barber more. It's not just that Barber was white and Still black; Barber a Brahmin from the North, Still a middle-class son of the South. Nor is it merely that Barber wrote racially neutral music, while Still wrote music whose very essence was race. Rather, the unexpected confluences between the two serve to cast their blatant contrasts into relief.

It took Still almost ten years to persuade any opera company to mount *Troubled Island*, once he completed the piano score in 1939. The Met was the first to reject it, general manager Edward Johnson deeming it simply "unsuitable." Conductor Leopold Stokowski then took up *Troubled Island*, going so far as to announce to the press that he himself would produce and conduct "this poetic and dramatic opera at the earliest possible moment at the City Center in New York," calling it "one of the most inspired expressions of Negro art in the United States." A campaign was even begun in 1945 to raise funds for Stokowski's production, spearheaded by Mayor Fiorello La Guardia himself, with Eleanor Roosevelt as honorary chair. Within the year, though, Stokowski had resigned from City Center, and production plans stalled. Still hung on. His librettist, Langston Hughes, barely did, unsuccessfully pressing Still to offer *Troubled Island* to Broadway producers. In the end, Still's purist determination was rewarded, if not exactly affirmed. *Troubled Island* was at last mounted by New York City Opera on March 31, 1949, but with Caucasians in blackface for both lead roles. Still had hoped to cast black singers in the principal parts. (Robert Weede sang the role of Jean-Jacques Dessalines at the opera's premiere on March 31, 1949, while African-American bass-bartione Lawrence Winters assumed the role for the two subsequent performances of the opera on April 1 and May 1, 1949.)

Effusively received by audiences during its three-performance run, *Troubled Island* was nevertheless widely dismissed, if not patronized, by the critics. "In all, *Troubled Island* had more of the soufflé of operetta than the soup bone of opera," wrote *Time* magazine, for example. "[Still] is still striving for something not yet within his grasp," added *TheNew YorkJournal-American*. "More in



Justino Diaz and Leontyne Price, Antony and Cleopatra in the world premiere of Samuel Barber's opera at the Metropolitan Opera House, 1966

(<http://www.operanews.org/uploaded/image/article/antonycleoplg2110.jpg>)

Justino Diaz and Leontyne Price, Antony and Cleopatra in the world premiere of Samuel Barber's opera at the Metropolitan Opera House, 1966



Oscar Natzka (Martel) and Robert Weede (Jean-Jacques Dessalines) in the world premiere of Still's *Troubled Island* at New

sorrow than anger," concluded Irving Kolodin of *The New York Sun*, "it must be reported that the City Center's effort to extend a helping hand to the American opera composer was met last night only by a turgid, confused mishap called *Troubled Island*."

Still, at the time, claimed a conspiracy by the critics to put this over-reaching "colored boy" in his place. "A white journalist in New York [later identified as *The New York Times*'s Howard Taubman] came to me several days before the opening," Still recounted in a 1950 article, "and warned me that the critics were planning to pan it." Whether or not the story can be proved (and there is evidence to suggest that the claim had merit), the quick demise of *Troubled Island* left Still shattered.

Samuel Barber wrote *Vanessa* to a libretto by his longtime companion, composer Gian Carlo Menotti. Though the Metropolitan Opera had long been interested in mounting anything that Barber might write, *Vanessa* was conceived without a commission. The composer auditioned it himself for the Met's general manager, Rudolf Bing, who was so impressed he announced *Vanessa* for the Met's upcoming season before the opera was actually finished. Opening on January 15, 1958, to generally rapturous reviews, the work received the Pulitzer Prize. Yet it soon fell into neglect.

Vanessa is a very personal lament for the evanescence of beauty and life itself. Barber's music is full of lush, plangent tonality ornamented by astringent, chromatic harmonies and even some dallying twelve-tone contrapuntalism. It was in part this unapologetic tonality that precipitated *Vanessa*'s rapid fall out of fashion in the age of the twelve-tone row - a tonality so gorgeously melodic, however, that it also wound up saving *Vanessa* from oblivion.

Like Still, Barber was a melodist, a master musical craftsman with a modernistically Romantic sensibility. Both were determined to compose in a style they deemed to be American yet were influenced inexorably by Europe and its overawing musical culture. In fact, both Still and Barber chose not to set their self-defined "new American operas" in the U.S.: *Troubled Island* takes place in Haiti, *Vanessa* "in a northern country" that, however vaguely situated, seems inescapably European.

The American journey that Barber traversed in his own life could not have been further removed from the journey Still made. Born in the strongly Episcopalian precincts of West Chester, Pennsylvania, on March 9, 1910, Barber grew up cocooned in upper-middle-class comfort, surrounded by music at a very elevated level. His father was a doctor; his mother was a sister of Metropolitan Opera contralto Louise Homer. Still was born in Woodville, Mississippi, on May 11, 1895, to a pair of teachers and grew up surrounded by spirituals, gospel music and Red Seal classical 78s in Little Rock, Arkansas, where his mother had fled after his father's sudden death under highly suspicious circumstances. Barber was an acknowledged child prodigy, admitted into the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia at the age of fourteen to study voice, piano and composition. Still's announcement at age sixteen that he intended to become a composer horrified his mother, who didn't believe composing was a respectable profession.

York City Opera, 1949
<http://www.operanews.org/uploaded/image/article/troubledislandlg2110.jpg>

Oscar Natzka (Martel) and Robert Weede (Jean-Jacques Dessalines) in the world premiere of Still's *Troubled Island* at New York City Opera, 1949

As a black composer, Still was a pioneer. His arrival in New York in the early 1920s coincided with the efflorescence of the Harlem Renaissance, a fashionable age for "the New Negro" encompassing highbrow literary ferment and low-down cabaret fever. Still quickly broke through as the movement's leading (and virtually lone) classical-music star, taken up by the composer Edgar Varèse, who offered the premiere of Still's *From the Land of Dreams* in 1925 and *Levee Land* in 1926, via his own avant-garde-promoting International Composers' Guild Orchestra.

Barber's New York arrival in 1934, after he graduated from the Curtis Institute, was smoothed by the patronage of the school's founder, Mary Louise Curtis Bok, who arranged all the right introductions. Within a very short time, fledgling Barber works such as his *Overture to The School for Scandal* (1931), 1932 Cello Sonata and *Music for a Scene from Shelley* (which received its premiere at Carnegie Hall in 1935) were being programmed by the world's leading conductors, including Arturo Toscanini.

Mainstream success arrived with the *Adagio for Strings*, given its premiere by Toscanini and the NBC Symphony in 1938. Still had achieved his own comparable breakthrough in 1931 with the premiere of Symphony No. 1 *Afro-American* by the Rochester Philharmonic, led by composer Howard Hanson, another early Still champion. Both pieces received considerable press attention. Both were traditionally tonal and inescapably European in construction. Both struck a tone of melancholy with a visceral appeal to the emotions that audiences adored. One difference, however, separated these signature works and continues to divide Barber and Still to this day - Still's rooting of his symphony in his race, particularly his use of twelve-bar blues progressions and harmonies.

Barber's *Adagio* inhabited a realm that seemed beyond race or any other earthly considerations, its ascending melodic line reaching for and apparently grasping a profound, cathartic state of universal sorrow. Despite the naked feeling expressed, it was resolutely and unflinchingly modern, a modernity that transcends time. Yet the repetitive, aching simplicity of Barber's melody suggests nothing so much as the blues oddly enough - but the blues Barber's way.

Still's turn toward his own ethnic folk heritage, and away from programmatic modernism, in his search for a musical language may be summed up in one word - "jazz." The argument that jazz has been America's only truly original musical contribution to the world can be argued both for and against solely in terms of Samuel Barber and William Grant Still. Almost from the outset, the essence of Still's output resided in jazz and the blues. And almost from the outset, Barber had little use for either. Can any composer who claims to write firstly as an American composer eschew the blues and jazz? Barber could. His only overt forays appear to have been the four piano bagatelles he called *Excursions* (1942-44), which explored all sorts of musical Americana, including boogie-woogie; some jazz-reminiscent rhythms and harmonies that float through his 1949 Piano Sonata; and Barber's one-act chamber opera, *A Hand of Bridge* (1959), which wove in jazz-like motifs in a most sardonic manner.

Still's blues and jazz roots were deep and distinguished. His first significant job in the music business before coming to New York had been working for W. C. Handy as house arranger at

Handy's Memphis-based music publishing firm. Once Handy and Still had moved to New York, Still joined the new Black Swan Phonograph Company as music director and was involved in that label's many seminal blues and jazz recordings. Still contributed arrangements and played oboe in the pit for Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle's groundbreaking black Broadway musical *Shuffle Along*, in 1921, and was later hired as a staff arranger by the so-called "King of Jazz," Paul Whiteman, writing for Whiteman's top-rated *Old Gold Hour* on radio.

Still's first surviving attempt at an opera was *Blue Steel*, in the early 1930s, a work that he ultimately withdrew. He would go on to compose nine operas, all told, though only a handful of them were produced. By the time of *Troubled Island*, he already had written four more symphonies, after moving to Los Angeles in 1934, along with ballet scores and a multitude of orchestral and vocal works that were played by virtually every major orchestra in the country. He also worked as an arranger for the Hollywood studios throughout the 1930s and '40s. In the wake of *Troubled Island*, though, from the 1950s onward, he watched helplessly as his music slowly slipped out of the symphonic mainstream. To make ends meet, he wrote background music for television programs (including *Perry Mason*, *Gunsmoke* and *The Three Stooges*), but he defiantly continued to produce new, if largely ignored, serious work almost until his death, on December 3, 1978. His music evolved to embrace a variety of African and Caribbean folk styles that he researched assiduously and assimilated effortlessly, but in the end it was his melding of jazz and modernist classical style that defined him, much as it had defined George Gershwin, who clearly learned and even borrowed a great deal from William Grant Still.



Price as Barber's Cleopatra

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Samuel Barber composed but two full-length operas. The second, *Antony and Cleopatra*, very nearly broke his spirit, much as *Troubled Island* crushed Still's. Commissioned to open the new Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center in 1966, the piece proved an infamously bloody killing-field for two irreconcilable aesthetic points of view. On one side stood Barber, providing the minutely considered musical architecture for an opera he perceived as an intimate examination of autumnal love. On the opposite side stood his director and librettist, Franco Zeffirelli, gearing up for an extravaganza of sheer Egyptian spectacle. The cross-purpose results were a predictable mess. From the opening-night critics' perspective, the composer was largely to blame.

Was this fair? Revisiting *Antony and Cleopatra* today is a vividly emotional sonic experience. Again, Barber's determinedly tonal score offers up what a tonal score at its best can deliver - thrilling melodies filled with drama, rich orchestrations that subtly deploy modernist technique in service to dramatic line. Beyond the sets and costumes, was Zeffirelli's libretto ultimately at fault? It is interesting that Barber and Still both, for most of their operas, chose their own life partners as librettists - Menotti for *Hand of Bridge* and *Vanessa*; Still's wife, Verna Arvey, for everything that followed *Blue Steel*, including some last-minute work on *Troubled Island* after Langston Hughes walked away from the project. (Still, in fact, felt threatened by Menotti as a composer whose "declamatory style" and "Leftist" politics Still objected to, at least according to Beverly Soll, author of *I Dream a World: The Operas of William Grant Still*. In a letter to the music editor of

The New York Times on March 6, 1951, Still complained that the State Department had recently withdrawn a recording of *Troubled Island* from the Belgian National Radio "on the grounds that it was *mauvais* [bad] ... suggest[ing] that Mr. Menotti's works be substituted for mine.")

Menotti, as a librettist, would revisit *Antony and Cleopatra* with Barber in the 1970s, attempting to restore Barber's originally intended scope and scale to this piece that Zeffirelli had injected with such elephantism. Produced at the Juilliard School in 1975, their reworking was well received, as was a mounting at Lyric Opera of Chicago in 1991. A concert version performed twice last year as a fund-raiser by New York City Opera, with baritone Teddy Tahu Rhodes and soprano Lauren Flanigan singing the eponymous leads, perhaps showed Barber's score off to best effect. As *Variety* wrote, "A good case can be made for *Antony and Cleopatra*."

Barber's later years were difficult. His day-to-day relationship with Menotti ended, and Capricorn, their legendary retreat in Mount Kisco, New York, was sold in 1973. A notoriously taciturn man with a sharp, acidic wit, Barber battled depression and alcoholism during this final period, yet his creative output gave little ground to his personal difficulties. His final major work, *The Third Essay for Orchestra* (1978) - while rhythmically resounding to what literally sounds like the footsteps of approaching mortality - pursues the same questing spirit as *Adagio for Strings*. It is tinged, however, with an unexpectedly elegiac exoticism that - dare one say it? - William Grant Still would have appreciated.

In his lifetime, Barber was an acknowledged giant as a composer, the recipient of two Pulitzers and the American Prix de Rome, among many other prizes, and elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Still was the first African-American to conduct a major American symphony orchestra, the first to have a symphony of his own performed by a leading orchestra and the first to have an opera performed by a major opera company. Though he is often referred to as the dean of African-American composers, the title comes with the understanding that, as such, Still was also the dean of thwarted aspirations.

In their long careers, Barber and Still both wrote prolifically and, one might say, heroically - oblivious to musical fashion. Barber's legacy as a titan of twentieth-century music rests upon this artful iconoclasm - a composer who went his own way, a modernist of his own invention. Yet, the very same iconoclasm underlies Still's legacy as a neglected footnote to twentieth-century music. Legacies are not always commensurate with achievement or even output. Today, a search of iTunes yields 1,325 "songs" for Samuel Barber compared to less than 300 for William Grant Still. Predictably, Barber's *Adagio for Strings* and Still's First Symphony, respectively, predominate. There are two complete recordings of Barber's original *Vanessa* in four acts, plus one complete recording of the later three-act version. Of *Troubled Island* there is nothing. □

BARRY SINGER won a 2007 ASCAP Deems Taylor award for his most recent book, *Alive at the Village Vanguard*.

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