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## Modern America: Still and Musical Modernism in the United States

*“What are the qualities which must be inherent in the person who aspires to write music? First, and most important, is the ability to induce the flow of inspiration, that indefinable element which transforms lifeless intervals into throbbing, vital, and heartwarming music.”*

—William Grant Still

### KEY POINTS

- American composers of the early twentieth century sought to define a unique tradition of American modernism.
- The **Harlem Renaissance** was a cultural movement in the 1920s and 30s that highlighted African American contributions to the country’s cultural heritage.
- African American composer William Grant Still broke numerous racial barriers in the art-music tradition. His Suite for Violin and Piano looks to three black visual artists for inspiration.

### In His Own Words

“Life is for the living,  
Death is for the dead,  
Let life be like music,  
And death a note unsaid.”

—Langston Hughes

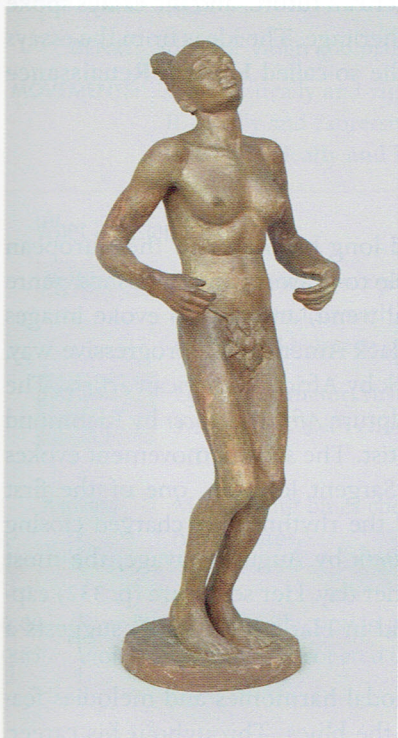
How can or should music reflect the identity of a composer? Romanticism introduced the ideal of autobiographical expression by the creative individual, and nationalism added the question of group identity, leaving artists to struggle with striking a balance between those two mandates. The 1920s and 30s were a time when African American artists in many media banded together to identify creative outlets for blacks that would both pay tribute to their heritage and recognize individual excellence regardless of race or ethnicity. One of the most prominent and successful musicians who joined this effort, William Grant Still, is now regarded as a pioneer both in the search for a “modern American sound” and in opening a wider range of musical opportunities for African Americans.

### The Harlem Renaissance

In the early 1900s, economic opportunity brought increasing numbers of African Americans to New York City, and specifically to the northern part of Manhattan called Harlem. By the beginning of the economic boom of the 1920s, a contemporary poet referred to Harlem proudly as “not merely a Negro colony or

## Interface

## Identity and the Arts in the Harlem Renaissance



Sculptor **Richmond Barthé** (1901–1989) focused on depicting African Americans at work in the fields and as ceremonial participants. *African Dancer* (1933).

You may know that the French term “renaissance” describes a rebirth or renewal of something from the past. The cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, sometimes referred to as “the New Negro movement,” was a literary, artistic, and sociological movement that highlighted African American intellectual life in the 1920s and 30s. It was a renewal of sorts in that African Americans looked to their historical and ethnic roots; centered in the predominantly black area of New York City known as Harlem, the movement was sparked in part by the craze for jazz that was

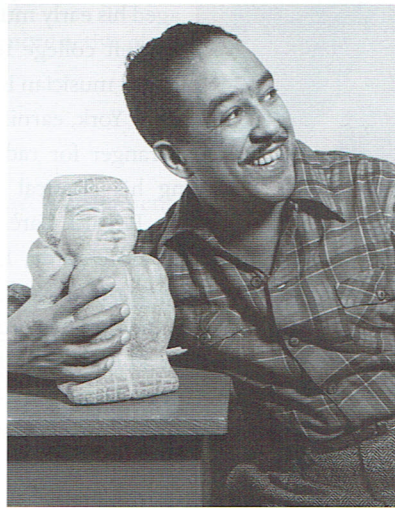
sweeping the country. Among the artists associated with it was sculptor Richmond Barthé, whose sympathetic portrayals of blacks—field workers, men of recognition, victims of racial violence, and African dancers—emphasized their individuality and physicality (see image).

The most important literary figure was Langston Hughes, a highly innovative African American poet whose works, depicting the struggles of working-class blacks, radiated with black pride. A frequent visitor to the Harlem jazz clubs, Hughes wrote verse that imitated the rhythms and flow of jazz, thus creating a new kind of jazz poetry. His first collection, *The Weary Blues* (1926), included his most famous poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” dedicated to W. E. B. DuBois, founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), comparing the spirit of his people to the rivers of the world. Another literary figure central to this movement was Zora Neale Hurston, whose creative efforts explored what it meant to be black and female in a male-dominated society. Her essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” reveals a woman strengthened by the hardships she has endured. Yet Hurston rejected “the sobbing school of Negrohood” that promoted self-pride. She claimed to transcend her race: “I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads.” Her famous essay colorfully describes moments when she feels racial differences, such as when she attends a jazz club with a white friend who does not experience the sense

of the “jungle beyond” that she feels from the music.

Most jazz musicians, including Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday, gained early recognition performing in Harlem jazz clubs, including the famous Apollo Theater and the Cotton Club. A prolific composer as well, Ellington considered his works to be “tone parallels” to the lives of blacks. Like Hurston, African American musicians uniformly rejected the stereotyped images of blacks that had been popular in minstrel shows, and they worked to break down the long-standing prejudice against black musicians and artists. Among these crusaders was composer William Grant Still, whose creative efforts merge art and traditional musical genres: he held the view that “the Negro artist is important in American society because he demonstrates that achievement is possible in our democracy.”

African American poet **Langston Hughes** (1902–1967) was an important Harlem Renaissance figure.



community, [but] a city within a city, the greatest Negro city in the world.” Building on a growing sense of a new black cultural identity, a book of essays called *The New Negro* was published in 1925, edited by philosopher Alain Locke, a Harvard graduate who became the first African American Rhodes scholar. Locke and the other authors of *The New Negro* encouraged their fellow black artists to look to Africa for inspiration on how to shape their American future, and the essays spoke about racial equality and pride in black cultural heritage. The ideas from the essays in *The New Negro* are credited with sparking the so-called **Harlem Renaissance** (see Interface on p. 329).

### Still's Suite for Violin and Piano

In choosing the genre of the suite, which had long been part of the European dance and programmatic tradition, Still was able to draw on an established genre (one that reflected the modernist neo-Classical trend) and also to evoke images that he felt exemplified the artistic efforts of black America in a progressive way. He based each movement on a different artwork by African American artists. The spirited first movement was inspired by the sculpture *African Dancer* by Richmond Barthé (p. 329), a noted Harlem Renaissance artist. The second movement evokes the expressive mood of *Mother and Child* by Sargent Johnson, one of the first Californian black artists to achieve fame. And the rhythmically charged closing movement draws on the impish humor of *Gamin* by Augusta Savage, the most prominent African American woman artist of her day. Her sculpture (p. 332) captures the confident image of a street-smart kid in Harlem (“gamin” suggests a street urchin).

The movements of the suite all employ modal harmonies and melodies featuring lowered thirds and sevenths, typical of the blues. Throughout his career,

## William Grant Still (1895–1978)



Still grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas. His parents, both educators, encouraged his early music studies on violin. He left college to work as a professional musician in Memphis and then New York, earning a reputation as an arranger for radio and musical theater, while continuing his classical music studies with French-born composer Edgard Varèse. Still deliberately moved away from the avant-garde, however, to find his original voice in the music of his black cultural heritage.

His first symphony, the *Afro-American*, was premiered in 1931 by the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra: the first symphony by an African American composer to be performed by a major American orchestra. The symphony brought him numerous commissions from major orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic. In 1934, he won a Guggenheim Fellowship and moved to Los Angeles, where he wrote film and television scores. An opera, *Trou-*

*bled Island*, was produced by New York's City Opera in 1949, marking another first for an African American composer. Still was recognized with many honorary degrees during his last years, and wrote theme music for such popular TV series as *Gunsmoke* and *Perry Mason*. He remained in Los Angeles until his death in 1978. In his music, Still looked to writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance for inspiration, including the renowned poet Langston Hughes, whose libretto he set for *Troubled Island*, on the struggles of the Haitian people.

**MAJOR WORKS:** Orchestral music, including four symphonies (No. 1, *Afro-American Symphony*, 1930) • Orchestral suites • Film scores • Stage works, including four ballets (*La Guiabliesse*, 1927; *Sahdji*, 1930) • Eight operas, including *Troubled Island* (1937–49) • Chamber music, including Suite for Violin and Piano (1943) • Vocal music, including *Songs of Separation* (1949) and spiritual arrangements • Piano music • Choral music.