

Follow-up to in-class writing on William Grant Still, week of April 3-7

Why would W.G. Still write a symphony when he could write any kind of music he pleased?

The genre

I'm guessing he wanted to create a symphony because of how grand and unique they are. Symphonies are [played by] a huge ensemble with a range of instruments from violin to flute.

Symphonies are popular in every era. Therefore, it will be played for many years.

As a participant in the ongoing aesthetic/artistic movement of the Harlem Renaissance

William Grant Still was in search of the "modern American sound." He was inspired by sculptures and images that showed the effort of black Americans. Symphonies are considered an art. It was a good way of expressing these images through his symphonies. Still connects the rhythm of the blues to his symphony, showing us, the listeners, this combination of a low expression to something artistic and something that sounds beautiful at the same time. The artistic sounds of his piece give us a different sense of sound throughout the piece, and it feels like being in two time periods at once.

I think he wanted to demonstrate that it [blues] is elegant and sophisticated music, too. I think he's proving people wrong and combining soul and quality or sound. I can see the relationship of William Grant Still's *Afro-American Symphony* and the poem "I, too." They both express sentiments of knowing their worth, as an artist, as a human being, as black men who had, and still have, to work double to get minimum recognition.

In my opinion Still chose to write a symphony to show off his musical talent. As an African-American he was not expected to possess the ability to write a symphony and by him being so talented it diminishes some stereotypes that he shouldn't be able to do this. People may have been truly amazed by his work, and it has a lot to do with society's view of African-Americans at that time, and as Hughes says in his poem, "I, too," "They send me to eat in the kitchen / when company comes, / but tomorrow— / they'll see how beautiful I am." Still illustrates this poem because he was so talented and didn't need to hide his talent. Still brought blues, which is a part of African-American culture to his symphony and that made it stand out from the work of other musicians/composers. Listening to the piece you can't tell if this composer is black/white, just that the piece of music is written and played exceptionally well.

National identity

[drawing upon Forkel, *A General History of Music*, 1788-1801] Still wanted to show that he had some intellect when it comes to music. To show that his music was advanced and lived up to European standards.

Racial identity

During the time that Still was alive blacks were looked down upon, thought to be incapable and inferior to white people. Still wrote this symphony to show he was highly capable of anything. It's the equivalent of someone saying to him, "You can't do it!" and Still replying, "Hold my beer."

Multiple reasons: celebrating cultural identity, asserting national identity, promoting personal skill, asserting/subverting social class identity

I feel like he wanted to test his limits and fully recognize his talent by making a great symphony which is no easy task. He also wanted blues to be viewed as highly as classical music is viewed by incorporating the two together. It was also a possible way to “Americanize” a symphony which was rarely composed by Americans back then. Since the blues was “considered a lowly expression” he wanted to make the blues like classical symphonies which were highly admired as a sense of social status.