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“Sons of Africa, Come Forth”: A Discussion of the Compositional Approaches of William Grant Still in the Opera *Troubled Island*

Sons of Africa join with me! Tomorrow we'll be free!
Come forth now Senegalese, tall and proud like cocoanut trees!
And you that are here from the coast of Calabar.
Men from the Congo join too! The congo drums will beat for you.
Ashanti men, be with us then. For African in Haiti now lifts her hand
in freedom's vow.

—from the aria “Sons of Africa”

William Grant Still's *Troubled Island* has been the subject of intrigue and controversy. As scholars try to understand the composer's and librettist's different intentions and the circumstances surrounding the 1949 production, we find that there are many facets to this discussion. This paper will discuss Still's attempts to musically convey the action and emotion of Hughes's libretto while paying particular attention to Still's compositional approaches, the latter's attempts to portray black Haitian culture especially via the use of authentic folk music, and the structure of the opera as a whole. Whenever possible excerpts from the 1949 rehearsal score and Still's sketches will be used to support the assertions put forth here.

In 1937 writer Langston Hughes completed the libretto for what would become the opera *Troubled Island*. This work, based on a revised version of Hughes's play “Drums of Haiti,” chronicled the spectacular rise and fall of Haitian leader Jean Jacques Dessalines. The work itself would mark a historic moment in African American history in that two of the major artistic purveyors of the Harlem Renaissance, composer William Grant Still and writer Langston Hughes, found themselves collaborating on the writing and production of an opera whose subject reflected the pan-African and diasporic perspective that was developing amongst the intellectual, political, and artistic circles in New York.

After months of conferences with the writer about the detailed structure of the libretto, composer Still was now left alone with the task of bringing this story to life through his music. Not long after completing the first draft of the libretto, Langston Hughes left the United States to cover the Spanish Civil War for the black newspaper the *Afro American*. The distance between Still and Hughes complicated the process of completing the opera, and before long the composer engaged his wife, Verna Arvey, to make final adjustments to the poetry.

Two years would pass before the opera was completed, and it would take an additional ten years for it to reach production. The result of this extended labor was the mature flowering of the black composer's initiation into the arena of opera. But what, if anything, does *Troubled Island* reveal to us about Still's understanding of black Caribbean culture or his ability to convey these African-derived traditions in a European artistic form?

The African elements that define the cultural and musical practices of black Haiti in the eighteenth century, the setting of the opera, are manifestations of earlier African inhabitants' adaptations to their new surroundings. The island, which came under French rule in 1697, boasted one of the most stable economies in the Western Hemisphere during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Called the "Pearl of the Antilles," the island exported more sugar, coffee, and tobacco than all of the other islands of the Caribbean combined. African slaves, who numbered over half a million by 1800, among only 40,000 white Europeans, sustained this industry. The African inhabitants of Haiti, much like similar populations throughout the Caribbean, were continuously imported to feed this ever-growing need for cheap labor. As the island's population of Africans and mulattos increased, the culture of Haiti began to take on a strong African identity. Religious and musical practices were among the most prominent of African retentions. Voodoo, most commonly spelled "vodou" in Haiti, continued to dominate slave practices well into the twentieth century, even as it was blended with elements of French Catholicism. Drummers continued to serve as essential participants in worship services, and they conveyed to other slaves coded messages and spiritual sustenance through their varied rhythms.

African slaves in Haiti were not unaffected by the non-religious music of the Europeans they interacted with. Most enjoyed the forms of popular entertainment practiced by French planters. While they were forbidden to attend events as audience members, many were drafted as entertainers and became adept on European instruments. Such activities were not so pervasive as to sever the strong cultural links between Haiti and Africa, however. Scholarship on the trans-Atlantic slave trade chronicles the varied mixture of slaves brought from different regions of West and Central Africa to Haiti and other islands of the Caribbean. Many of the Haitian slaves came from as far north on the west coast as Senegal and as far south as Angola. One can see and hear these connections in the folk dance and music traditions of the island.

Haiti would become one of the first colonies to achieve independence as a free black state when slaves led first by voodoo priests and later by self-appointed warriors such as Dessalines, enacted some of the bloodiest uprisings in the Caribbean. Unfortunately, many of these black revolutionaries proved to be just as oppressive as their white precursors. In time a cultural divide deepened between the black elite, most of whom were mulatto, and the black working class. The elite's attempts to repress the black folk music and dance traditions of the island revealed the depth of this chasm, as did its rejection of the Haitian Creole dialect, which provided a concrete link with the African continent with its adaptation of African dialects.

With such a varied and intriguing history, Haiti and its slave insurrections became the focus of many literary and theatrical works. Hughes and Still's interest in the culture of black Haiti coincided with the emerging diasporic perspective among African Americans toward Africa and African people during the 1930s more or less coincident with the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes's interest in the island was sparked after its occupation by U.S. Marines from 1915 to 1935. The writer viewed the occupation as more of an invasion than a good will tour. (Prior to the military takeover the National City Bank in New York took control over the Bank of Haiti in order to protect the country from mounting debts to European nations.) Still's interest in Caribbean culture had originated years earlier, in 1927, when he was commissioned to write the music to the ballet *La Guiablesse* by choreographer Ruth Page, who had penned the scenario set in Martinique. Although the work was only performed several years later, it marked the first of several collaborative efforts among choreographers, dancers, and composers who focused their works on Caribbean and African dance and culture. During the early 1930s, Still and choreographer/dancer Katherine Dunham, who had traveled extensively and studied the culture of Africans in the Caribbean, had discussed a project which would reflect Haitian life according to the dancer's observations. The work never materialized, but later a Dunham company alumnus, Jean Leon Destine, choreographed the voodoo dance scenes for the 1949 *Troubled Island* performances.

The Hughes libretto provided Still with the opportunity to revisit the folk music of the Caribbean, especially meringue and the drumming of voodoo rites that had come to define the African musical experience in Haiti. Unlike Hughes, who felt it necessary to visit the island and immerse himself in the indigenous culture of it, Still limited himself to printed sources found in the United States. He searched record shops hoping to find recordings of Haitian music, but these items proved elusive. Although he enlisted the help of many of his friends, such as author Ralph Ellison, his hunt was frequently stymied. Ellison reported to Still in July 1937:

Before sailing Langston Hughes asked that I look around for recordings of Haitian folk music and see that you were informed as to just what in this type of music was to be had in recorded form.

So far, I'm sorry to report I have been unable to discover a single recorded Haitian melody. My search has carried me to the principal records shops and at each have received the same answer to my queries. There seems to have been little attention given to this body of native folk material and it was only at the Spanish record shop that I came anywhere near reality. At one time they had carried the Haitian National Anthem, but have failed to restock over a period of two years. However, they were kind enough to contact the Victor people who remembered having released two recordings a few years back, but were unable to supply me with titles or record numbers. I am following this lead and I hope to find these forgotten discs in some forgotten music store, no doubt on some forgotten street.¹

Ellison continues in the letter to urge that the composer check at record shops carrying French recordings. He asserts his understanding that the French had "given some attention to this work."² It is not clear if Still actually took Ellison's suggestion, but in the end he came up dry. A Marine officer, John Huston Craige, who had been stationed in Haiti during the Marine occupation, gave Still the only sources of Haitian music he ever acquired. These were two themes: a meringue, a popular form of music which originated in the neighboring Dominican Republic, adapted by Haitians; and a voodoo melody, the latter being the most direct example relating to the spiritual and musical practices of African slaves on the island. It is not clear from extant evidence if these themes were presented to the composer already notated in manuscript form or consisted of excerpts from recorded material. If genuine, they are likely the only "authentic" Haitian folk music used in the opera. The remainder of course consists of Still's own original material, shaped in accordance with his principles and imaginative conceptions.

Theoretically and compositionally composer William Grant Still was changing when he began working on the music to *Troubled Island* in the late 1930s. He stood at the nexus of two compositional identities that mapped his perspectives on race and art music. Gayle Murchison names these two musical periods or approaches as the "racial idiom" and the "universal idiom." Prior to *Troubled Island* Still's works had been focused on the validation of black vernacular forms through their adaptation into European forms with titles that spoke directly to their cultural connections (e.g., *Afro American Symphony*, *Darker America*, etc.). However, by the mid 1930s Still had turned his compositional focus to other genres of New World folk music, such as those containing Caribbean themes, cowboy songs, and Native American music.³ What eventually would become known as the universal idiom reflected Still's evolving perspective, one defined by his experiences of living in multi-racial and multi-cultural Los Angeles. It is the duplicitous nature of these identities that is presented in *Troubled Island*. Rhetorically and theoretically the opera would represent

Alain Locke and W. E. B. Dubois's notions of racial and cultural validation, but musically it would mirror Still's expanding musical perspective—one that was centered on representing the universality of music and culture.

In 1937 Still completed a portion of act I, and an extension of an earlier Guggenheim fellowship enabled him to resume work and finally complete the piece in 1938. Part of 1939 was devoted to orchestration, which he accomplished without the aid of an outside copyist. Still's compositional approach to the opera is best described as a combination of creative effort—determining notes, expressive nuances, and orchestral colors—and mechanical work, consisting of making the final piano-vocal score on a music typewriter and master sheets for later reproduction. During his periods of creative effort Still would compose between two and twenty-five measures at a sitting. He initially scored the opera for a very large orchestra, but later rescored it for a much smaller group. He also built miniature sets for each act, to aid in visualizing the action of particular scenes. (Unfortunately, these sets were later destroyed.) Still's completed score consists of continuous music that combines well-derived leitmotifs representing main characters, ideals, and locales with independent ensemble passages, arias, and recitatives. Shortly after the completion of the orchestration, Still outlined his intentions and purposes as follows:

I have attempted deliberately to write music that will appeal to Americans. I have sought above all to write in such a way that listeners will be able to understand the words. Feeling that the speed of English speech is slightly less than that of some other languages (Italian, French, and Spanish particularly), I have adopted a more leisurely pace in the declamatory passages. The melodic lines of the declamatory passages will be found to adhere to an extent of the inflection of the speaking voice. I plan for pantomime to play an important part in "Troubled Island." Slight intervals are allowed for it. If it be desired I will gladly submit a list of the motives employed. And also a list of the places where these motives or special treatments of them appear.⁴

With the score completed, the composer turned his attention to securing performances of the work. The next ten years would prove to be tedious and disheartening. Beset with financial woes and consistent setbacks, the opera's production met delay after delay.

Structure and Motivic Development in the Opera

The opera is comprised of a story told in four acts joined together through orchestral interludes (in which most of the motives are presented), arias, recitatives, and ensemble passages. The four acts were shortened to three when the third and fourth were combined before it reached production in 1949. There are some twenty-two arias and ensemble sections with the orchestral material consisting of themes that emphasize various

emotions or points of action (see Table 1). Similar to another noteworthy American opera, *Porgy and Bess*, *Troubled Island* begins with a dark lullaby. Titled “Little Black Slave Child,” sung by Celeste (mezzo soprano), this dark and brooding aria sets the mood of the first act, as the slaves and Dessalines prepare for the revolt. After various recitatives Azelia (contralto) and Dessalines (baritone) are left alone to sing of their love and experiences. Their duet, “Night in the Slave Hut,” comes to symbolize the infinity of their love, and returns in the final act when Azelia sings over a dying Dessalines. The aria “Africa” recalls the triumphant life of Africans on the mother continent before slavery. It is sung by Martel (bass), an elder who represents the link between the older generation of Africans and those born in the West. It is followed by Dessalines’s aria, “Sons of Africa,” which is a call to arms. Following the voodoo chorus and a simulated voodoo ritual, Dessalines leads the ensemble into the final chorus, “To The Hills,” which ends the first act.

Act II, set several years into Dessalines’s reign as Emperor of Haiti, consists primarily of arias and the infamous duet between Claire and Vuval. Act III is divided into two scenes with the first consisting of a minuet which leads into a voodoo dance. In this scene Dessalines’s past revisits him in what will be his last chance for redemption, and he sings a closing aria rebuking his subjects for allowing drums in the court. The second scene of act III marks the decline of Dessalines and his subsequent assassination. The moving finale, sung by a crazed and rejected Azelia, reminds the audience of the promise of Dessalines’s desire for freedom and the conquering power of love.

TABLE 1: Structure of arias, ensemble passages, and thematic material in *Troubled Island*

Act I: In Front of an Abandoned Sugar Mill

- Overture: includes both Dessalines’s motive and the rebellion (revolt) motive
- “Little Black Slave Child,” aria sung by Celeste, a slave woman (mezzo soprano) In the accompanying recitative Azelia’s motive is introduced in its original form. Dessalines (baritone) enters and he and Azelia (contralto) declare their love for each other.
- “Night in the Slave Hut,” duet between Dessalines and Azelia; segue into aria, “In Childhood Together.” Martel’s motive is introduced by the accompanying recitative as he enters.
- “Africa,” aria sung by Martel (bass); recounts life before the slave traders came.
- Chorus: “Slaves of This World,” segue into “Sons of Africa,” aria sung by Dessalines.
- Voodoo Chorus: voodoo theme first introduced; an ensemble with dancing and drumming. (African drums are not employed but simulated with tympani.)

- "Our Time Has Come," short aria sung by Dessalines, transition into the final chorus and end of the act: "To the Hills."

Act II, Scene 1: The Palace of the Emperor

- Overture
- "Most High and Mighty King of Haiti," aria sung by the mulatto and assistant to Dessalines, Vuval (tenor).
- "Why Do You Laugh," short aria sung by Dessalines; At the end of the aria Martel's motive appears in an altered form foreshadowing his reappearance.
- "I Dream a World," aria sung by Martel. Hughes was most proud of this aria. Claire's motive appears for the first time in the recitative following this work.

Act II, Scene 2: The Banquet Terrace

- "Sunset in the Garden," aria sung by Claire (soprano) that is shortly interrupted by Dessalines. Vuval enters the garden and the two discuss their unhappiness.
- "This Dark Land," aria sung by Vuval; transition into recitative, then the duet, "Love Calls," sung by Vuval and Claire.

Act III, Scene 1: The Banquet

- Trio of Servants sing of their plight while preparing for the great feast.
- "I Am the Great Dessalines," aria sung by Dessalines before the banquet guests.
- Minuet: an instrumental number accompanying the ballet leading into the Voodoo Dance, which is also instrumental.
- "Drums in the Court," aria sung by Dessalines where he rebukes his advisors for allowing archaic drumming to occur in the palace.

Act III, Scene 2: A Quay in a Fishing Village

- Overture: presents the meringue theme given to Still.
- Chorus: "A Peasant Folk Are We."
- Chorus: "Men to the Boats," work song sung by the fishermen and accompanied by the market women.
- "I'll Swear by Ev'ry Scar I've Borne," aria sung by Dessalines before he is killed.
- "Night in the Slave Hut," a reprise of the duet in act I, but this time only sung by Azelia.

Nine main motives are presented in various forms throughout the opera. Still, wishing to emphasize the importance of these musical ideas, presents each during the recitative passages and orchestral interludes. The original form of each motive appears in the examples below.

Two additional motives are presented in the opera: "Intrigue," which is musically and aesthetically juxtaposed against Dessalines, and the "Sword." But their function is secondary when compared with the seven principle motives above.

Although Still asserts that his intentions were to give each act its own musical flavor, it is these motives which constitute the substance of the entire opera. The composer habitually used the motives in altered forms to display a turn in the action or a change in character behavior. A clear example of this can be found in Still's treatment of Azelia's motive. The theme is presented initially at the beginning of act I (Example 3), but when she and Dessalines share a quiet moment together before the revolt begins, it is transformed into the motive seen below. This motive and the adjoining recitative create the transition into Azelia's aria, "In Childhood Together," which in turn segues into the duet, "Night in the Slave Hut."

Example 8. Azelia's motive transformed.



Recitatives were constructed upon those motives that had direct bearing to the action of the moment and, as stated earlier, Still infused orchestral elements to underline specific thoughts or words. Special attention was given to the enunciation of the text and the composer approximated musically the rhythm of the natural speaking voice. According to Verna Arvey, he departed from operatic tradition that advocated the rhythmic freedom of recitative, by making it more metrical.⁵ In all the orchestral and vocal material presented in the opera is a confluence of melodic and rhythmic ideas that emphasize Still's ability to write sonorous melodies. Unfortunately this is accomplished at the expense of the type of dissonance treatment that at times might have moved the action of the libretto much more easily.

Still's Ties to Caribbean Culture in the Opera

Although Hughes's text draws some concrete connections between African and Haitian culture, Still's music often fails to portray such ideas. The poignant musical connections between Africa and Haiti presented in the opera occur in the voodoo scene in act I, revisited in act III, scene 1, and the meringue used in act III, scene 2. In the voodoo scene from act I the slaves, Dessalines, Azelia, and Celeste prepare for the impending revolt. After an emotional speech about freedom and equality, Dessalines in a final act to inspire and remind the other slaves of the reasons for revolt reveals the scars left by his master's whip. However, before Dessalines can lead the revolutionaries, the voodoo priest Papaloi and the voodoo priestess Mamaloi must consecrate him. The scene begins with drum-beating to signal the initia-

tion of the ceremony. Papaloi and Mamaloi enter with ceremonial drums and the sacrificial animal. The slaves begin chanting “Legba,” who, according to voodoo religious beliefs, serves as guardian of the crossroads between the spiritual and natural worlds. The chanting of the names of other *loas* (deities) follows this. As the music and accompanying dance become more animated the animal is sacrificed and its blood is poured on Dessalines’s head. He has now been ordained for his “mission” by the spirits of the ancestors. While Still spoke of themes heard throughout this scene and the rhythmic pattern supplied by the drums as being distinctly “authentic” to the Haitian experience, in fact they are not. Indeed, the rhythmic patterns of the voodoo theme fall far short of capturing the polyrhythmic nature of the music actually used to accompany native ceremonies. The complex layering of real vodou drumming practices is absent. Missing also is the most dominant rhythmic figure that defines the music of such rituals. A pattern known as the Kongo beat, two eighth notes followed by a quarter, is non-existent. One is left only with a solid, unsyncopated eighth-note pattern that makes the transition for the actions of this moment easy for the singers and dancers, but dilutes the impact of the vernacular tradition. An actual voodoo rite would have required faster and more driving music and more engaged singing. Two drums would have been used: a snare-like drum called the *basse*, which is played with two sticks and suspended around the player’s neck, and a second drum called the *gronde*. The *gronde* is played with the bare hands and would have offered a series of counter rhythms to the *basse*. These rhythms would have been augmented by the foot stamping and heavy breathing that accompanied it, which were heard in New Orleans, Philadelphia, and Charleston, as thousands of whites, blacks, and mulattos settled in these cities following the Haitian Revolution.⁶

Despite the lack of musical authenticity in the Voodoo scene, which Still admits to altering so as to fit the idiom in which he was writing, this is a poignant moment in the opera. Their rhythm eventually becomes a symbol of the influence and cultural “specter” of Africa. More important they will come to represent Dessalines’s forgotten past (slavery and tyranny), his unstable present (rejection of the ways of old; assuming the practices of his former oppressors symbolized in the adaptation of French culture), and unpredictable future (death).

Still’s use of the meringue melody as a motivic device in the overture of the second scene of the final act also has deep cultural connotations. The meringue or *mereng* as it is called in Haiti, was one of the most popular African-influenced dance styles on the island. A creolized dance style, it was claimed by both the elite and working class of Haiti.⁷ In time it came to symbolize the music of the whole people. In the opera its rhythmic pulse and melodic flavor counteract the darkness that overshadows the previous scene—where Claire and Vuval pledge their love for each other and openly acknowledge their betrayal of the Emperor—and draws a con-

nection with the fishermen and market women who dominate the beginning of this scene. It is at that moment—the instant at which the merengue appears—that the listener is drawn back from the complex motives and actions of the characters, filled with betrayal, abuse of power, and love, to the people of Haiti and their fight for identity and freedom.

Conclusion

In the article “Still Opera Points the Way,” Verna Arvey asserts that Still attempted to write music that would arouse an emotional rather than a cerebral response. Whatever Still’s compositional intentions, the score oftentimes misses its mark in supporting Hughes’s text. The strong racial statements and rhetorical assertions of man’s tyranny over man are often juxtaposed against lush sonorities that convey little of the emotion and tension these words project. One listens in vain for some semblance of Africa in the rhythms and harmonies heard throughout the composition. With the exception of Hughes’s text, even the Voodoo ritual that is executed in act I lacks cultural authenticity. One can perhaps excuse Still’s omissions given the lack of easily accessible information about Caribbean cultural and musical practices in the 1930s. Yet the composer’s inability to gather viable musical resources or to immerse himself in the music and culture of Haiti also placed Still at a disadvantage. With limited resources and exposure he was forced to draw from his personal reservoir of memories, which accounts for the opera at times sounding as if it were set in the rural south rather than the Caribbean. One must also take into account Still’s own compositional intentions. He states clearly that he intended to write music that would appeal to Americans. Such reasoning would justify the dilution of authentic folk idioms to make them more commensurable to European forms. What Still easily accomplished with the adaptation of African American vernacular elements in his symphonies, chamber works, and songs, could not so easily have been done with these Caribbean structures. Would Americans black or white have been receptive to the complex, polyrhythmic nature of voodoo drumming in the 1940s? Would the use of such material in its original form have strengthened racial stereotypes regarding African culture? It is hard to say, but I will posit that the composer himself may have found it difficult to bridge the two practices and feared that to use such material would have contributed to deeply imbedded racial clichés. In our conclusions about *Troubled Island* we must also consider the composer’s own developing sense of identity. Still was passing out of his racial period during the writing of the opera. Moving away from the use of black vernacular forms, he was gradually adopting a more global perspective and drawing from a multiplicity of musical sources.

The problems that critics and subsequent scholars have with *Troubled Island* may very well be related to Still and Hughes’s inability to work together in the crucial early stages of composition. We can only speculate as to the final outcomes musically and texturally if the two had had adequate time to work together on this historic work. Nevertheless, *Troubled*

Island remains a landmark and significant moment in the history of black composers of classical music, for without the successes and failures of the opera subsequent operas and their composers would not have found an audience for their works.

Notes

1. Letter to W.G.S. from Ralph Ellison dated 19 July 1937. William Grant Still and Verna Arvey Papers, Special Collections, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas.

2. Ibid.

3. Gayle Murchinson, "'Dean of Afro American Composers' or 'Harlem Renaissance Man': The New Negro and the Musical Poetic of William Grant Still," in Catherine Parsons Smith, *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 39-65.

4. Statement of intentions and purposes, William Grant Still, undated. William Grant Still and Verna Arvey Papers, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas.

5. Verna Arvey, "Still Opera Points the Way," *Music Forum and Digest* (August 1949). Reprinted in *William Grant Still and the Fusion of Cultures in American Music*, ed. Robert Haas (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1973) 94-98.

6. For more information regarding the Kongo beat and vodou practices in Haiti, see Gerdes Fleurant, "Music of the Kongo Rite of Haiti," *Music of the Caribbean*, ed. Beverley J. Anderson (New York: McGraw Hill, 1996), 55-64; Harold Courlander, *Haiti Singing* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938); Robert Farris Thompson, "Kongo Influences on African American Artistic Culture." *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

7. For more information on mereng or meringue, see Peter Manuel, *Caribbean Currents: Caribbean Music from Rumba to Reggae* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); John Storm Roberts, *Black Music of Two Worlds: African, Caribbean, Latin and African American Traditions*, 2nd ed. (New York: Schirmer Books, 1998).