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Troubled Island: A Symposium **Introduction**

Troubled Island, composed by William Grant Still to a libretto by Langston Hughes, achieved the distinction of being the first opera by any American composer to be produced by the New York City Opera.¹ Its premiere (31 March 1949) may well be regarded as the high point of Still's career as a composer. Although it was very warmly received by its opening night audience, the opera has not been revived. In fact, it has been surrounded by controversy that continues to this day. The second and third of the three performances scheduled were neither well attended nor received with the enthusiasm of the premiere, reflecting the lukewarm review given it by Olin Downes, music critic of the *New York Times*. The lack of an extended run and the absence of further productions by other companies led Still and his wife, Verna Arvey, to claim that a communist plot had assured the opera's "failure." Moreover, Still took issue publicly with Hughes over how much credit Arvey should receive for completing parts of the libretto left unfinished by Hughes when their collaborative period ended in early June 1938. Still's public break with Hughes and his communist-plot claims, made during the McCarthy era of rabid anti-communism, continued by his widow, and taken up by his daughter in later years, have led to a continuing debate that has diverted attention away from the opera itself.

This group of papers stems from a session that took place at a joint meeting of the Center for Black Music Research and the Society for American Music in May 2001. A stunning program of arias from Still's operas, given at a 1998 festival in Flagstaff, Arizona, had stimulated interest in Still as a dramatic composer, and specifically in a revival of this opera. The session was designed as a follow-up. What basic questions needed to be addressed in planning a revival of this, the second of Still's eight operas and the first of Hughes's three librettos? The session was intended to make a start at identifying and answering them.

Three papers were presented, yielding a discussion that cut to the meat of contrasting views from both the presenters and the audience about

Still's style and to what I shall term, leaving further explanation to be inferred from the papers below, his aesthetic "authenticity." As a white scholar, I was heartened and inspired because the papers (and the musical excerpts that accompanied them) moved the listeners, most of them black scholars and musicians, to share some new and insightful thoughts about Still and his work. I spoke on the collaboration between Hughes and Still, using dramatic turning points in the opera as examples. Tammy Kernodle spoke on how Still's music captures or misses the culture of the Caribbean and of Haiti as presented in Hughes's libretto, using as examples some of the major arias. Wayne Shirley spoke on the ironies involved in the climactic love duet between "the bad guys" in act II; he also presented information about the New York City Opera's scheduling procedures, clarifying one aspect of the conflict over the opera's reception.

The first three papers have been rethought and edited by their authors for this publication. To these three is added a fourth by Gayle Murchison, who had intended to participate in the original session but was unable to attend. To aid understanding all four, I have provided a summary of the opera's plot, with a list of the principal arias in each of its three acts and four scenes, as I did for the session in *Flagstaff*. Because of the absence of definitive rubrics indicating acts and scenes in the surviving sources, this summary differs in some details from Kernodle's similar chart on pp. 30-31, this journal. Two further papers on certain aspects of Still's symphonic music, by Earnest Lamb and Horace Maxile, offer insights on Still's compositional style.

TABLE 1

TROUBLED ISLAND (CPS summary)

Music by William Grant Still

Libretto by Langston Hughes

As produced by the New York City Opera 1949

Main characters:

- Jean Jacques Dessalines, a leader of the revolution who becomes Emperor
- Azelia Defilee, his wife, who remains loyal to Dessalines
- Stenio and Vuval, mulattoes who become Dessalines's aides and betray him; Vuval betrays the revolution as well
- Claire Heureuse, Dessalines's lover in Act II, who runs away with Vuval
- Martel, an elder born in Africa, councilor to Dessalines

Overture: Haiti, night

Act I. *Moonlight, the vast interior of an abandoned sugar mill. The eve of the revolution.*

- Celeste's lullaby ("Little dark slave child") and ensemble with Popo.
- Azelia enters ("Weapons I bring"); ensemble with Popo and Celeste.
- Dessalines and other slaves enter. Dialogue with Popo, Azelia, Celeste, slaves.

- Dessalines and Azelia alone, scene and duet (“Night in the slave huts/ Woman of mine”).
- Martel and slaves enter. Martel and chorus. “Africa? I remember Africa!”
- Dessalines’s call for rebellion and chorus (“Slaves in this world are we”).
- Vuval and Stenio, free mulattoes, enter and ask to join the rebellion. Martel and Dessalines persuade the slaves to accept them (“Their fathers were white, it is true./ But blood of Africa is theirs, too”).
- Mamaloi and Papaloi enter; dance, ritual voodoo sacrifice (instrumental). Dessalines (“Our time has come sound the great drum”); weapons distributed.
- Chorus of slaves (“To the hills! / To the hills that rise / Against the skies!”).

Act II. *Scene 1. Dessalines as ruler*

- Dessalines, illiterate, dictating to Vuval, his aide, who ridicules a barely literate request for a school (“Why do you laugh, Vuval?”).
- Martel enters, tells Dessalines they must do business with the hated French.
- Martel’s aria (“I dream a world”).
- Claire enters. First with Dessalines, then alone (“I hate this court”).
- Vuval enters. Duet with Claire (“Paris with you, my Claire, / Will be like Paradise!”).

Act II. *Scene 2. The banquet*

- Servants’ chorus (“To polish and shine, / That fate is mine”).
- Azelia enters, is ridiculed and dismissed by the servants.
- Herald announces the guests; procession (“The Duke and Duchess of Dondon!”).
- Dessalines enters, with chorus (“I am the great Dessalines”).
- Azelia’s new attempt to enter is turned back before Dessalines sees her.
- Ballet: formal minuet danced by mulattoes, overtaken by black dancers with drums.
- Dessalines, on Claire’s demand, orders the drums to stop (“Drums in the court!”) and the courtiers to return to the fields to work.
- Martel warns briefly (“Take care”).
- Messenger enters with news of rebellion; the guests leave; Dessalines draws his sword and prepare to leave (“All traitors I will meet head-on! / The tiger rides into the dawn.”).

Act III. *On the quay of a fishing village*

- Chorus of market women, peasants, and fishermen (“A peasant folk are we”); vendors hawking fruit; fishermen and market women flirt.
- Azelia enters disheveled and mindless (“Weapons I bring”), is driven off.
- Vuval, Stenio, and soldiers enter (“Clear the square!”) and prepare the ambush (“Tis here our noble Emperor will come / Thinking to find his traitorous generals. / Instead he’ll find his end!”).
- Dessalines and Popo enter the deserted square (“What soldiers dare desert their posts?”).

- Stenio and soldiers emerge, order him captured; Stenio and Dessalines duel; Vuval shoots Dessalines.
- Orchestral interlude. Claire enters, silently kicks the body, and exits. Ragamuffins enter and start to strip the body.
- Azelia enters, chases the ragamuffins, discovers that the body is Dessalines (“Jean Jacques, my lover, / My husband, mine! / In death you lie so still, / Broken your pride and your will.”).

Note

1. An audiocassette tape of the dress rehearsal for the New York City Opera's production, intended (but never used) for rebroadcast by the Voice of America, is available from William Grant Still Music, 1109 S. Univ. Plaza Way, Suite #109, Flagstaff, AZ 86001-6317, as is a CD of some of the performances at the 1998 festival.

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