

Communication

April 26, 2004

To the Editor of the *Journal*,

I have read the recent journal [this *Journal*, Volume 13] dedicated to the work of William Grant Still with interest, and naturally I want to thank you for your desire to pay attention to the composer. A few reactions of mine are in order.

The articles by Earnest Lamb and Horace Maxile are, in my estimation, the most valuable aspects of the publication. They are excellent. I am not a musician, but I think that they are insightful, well-presented, and far-reaching in their implications for Afro-American musicological studies.

Gayle Murchison's piece makes many significant points. Her revelations about the Communist affiliations of Langston Hughes will be seen as vital information when our book on *Troubled Island* is published next year. The only thing amiss with Dr. Murchison's study is her belief that the government opposed Still's opera because it was connected with the Bolshevik cause through Langston, and through its subject matter. There is considerable evidence that the State Department opposed the opera only because the composer was an anti-Communist.

Substantiation for the idea that the State Department was a part of the Red intrigue is the following: officials did not take the opera out of circulation to replace it with a work by a pro-American; they took it out to replace it with operas by Menotti; and Menotti, like Langston Hughes, was Left-leaning. In addition, much evidence, found recently in FBI files and secret government documents, reveals that there were many Red sympathizers in the State Department in 1949. Even Langston, and several of his fellow-traveling friends, were included in the service of the Office of War Information. Ergo, it is unlikely that the State Department objected to *Troubled Island* because Langston was involved, inasmuch as Langston was part of their own war efforts. Finally, it would have been hardly possible for the government to view Still as having written a protest work, given the fact that the Stills already had a dossier with the FBI which documented their blatant anti-Red attitudes.

There is also evidence to refute Wayne Shirley's idea that *Troubled Island* only had three performances as a matter of course, of common practice, and of scheduling procedures. Documents in our upcoming book will show that more than three performances were looked for. Furthermore,

Shirley forgets that *Troubled Island* was not “business as usual” at City Center—it was their first world premiere, and a history-making event. It was not subject to rules of ordinary practice, and it should have had at least as many performances as Menotti’s operas. As everyone knows, Menotti has been performed consistently since 1949. Shirley wonders why anyone should be upset that *Troubled Island* only had three performances. If we substitute the opera *Carmen* in this last sentence for the title *Troubled Island*, we can imagine what the world would have lost if *Carmen* had only had three performances. Is *Troubled Island* comparable to *Carmen*? Absolutely. Is its loss a tragedy? Without doubt.

Sadly, Shirley will not admit that a tragedy has occurred, while his fellow academician, Tammy Kernodle, believes that the tragedy is in the fact that the opera belonged to Still, and not to Langston Hughes. But, where in the musical arena, and in any era or nation, is there a reality wherein a librettist takes precedence over the composer? Opera has always belonged to composers, while librettists are less than secondary. It is absurd to suggest that any composer of opera should follow the lead of the librettist.

Langston Hughes was not a greater man than Still, nor was he a recognized musician of any relevant merit. Still, in the thirties and forties he was at the top of his field. It was only his kindness that led him to accede to Langston’s desire to receive a 50% royalty for his libretto. More importantly, Langston did not complete his libretto, and the parts that were added by Verna Arvey were more praised by people-in-the-know than those that came from Langston’s pen.

Tammy Kernodle states that Still set out, in his opera, to portray African and Haitian culture and to support Hughes’s text. She tells the composer what it is that he set out to do, and then she condemns him for not having done these tasks that she has thrust upon him. In actual fact, Still did not set out to write an opera that slavishly portrayed Haitian culture, nor was he attempting to convey the emotion of Hughes’s libretto. He was expressing his own emotion, his own mission, his own “love story,” as he called it. He did not need to understand “black Caribbean culture” for his opera, nor did he strive at bottom to convey “African derived traditions in artistic form.” Kernodle’s rather superior assertion that the composer should have substituted dissonance for sonorous melodies (in order to be true to what Langston was trying to do) is shocking. Her naïve idea that the action would be moved along more efficiently if the music were more dissonant, reminds me of John Cage’s idea that several minutes of silence are musical.

William Grant Still was under no obligation to follow Langston’s concept of the opera; indeed, it would have been improper and dishonorable for him to have done so. Under what laws of genius was he required to reflect literally the music and culture of Haiti, to turn the focus of his opera toward Communist propaganda, to make of his work a pro-Black document? Why should a creative person, owing to his skin color, be forced to let others tell him how he should think, act, or express himself? Why should

he write a promo show for the Haitian Chamber of Commerce, or indulge in dissonance instead of melody, or talk about race and politics, when all he set out to do was to write a love story? If Professor Kernodle were Japanese and alive in 1904, she most certainly would have told Puccini that *Madama Butterfly* was a poor work because it did not accurately reflect Japanese music and culture.

Madama Butterfly was timeless, and the honor of having written it belonged to Puccini. Its detractors are lost and forgotten. *Troubled Island* is immortal as well and will similarly win fame for the composer in the future. The work has just the right amount of dissonance and the perfect melodic presence. As Artie Shaw said, "Still always did the right thing musically." It would be well if scholars could learn to appreciate the fruits of true greatness, instead of trying to blame the composer for the jealousy and enmity of his critics.

And, speaking of critics, I cannot end this discussion without mentioning the writings of Catherine Smith. Smith's article in your journal is fairly innocuous, in spite of her earlier claims (in *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000]) that the composer and his wife were "anti-social," "nervous," "snobbish," "paranoid," "pushy," and "deficient in coping skills." It is probable that her continued research has shown these adjectives to be untrue and inappropriate, which, indeed, they are. She does, however, add one or two other inaccurate statements to the list, the first being that the second performance of *Troubled Island* was poorly attended and received. We have two documents in the archives which report quite the opposite circumstance.

Smith's second error in fact or judgment occurs when she concurs with two other scholars in the journal that Still's opera is not a good opera. Three of the writers in the volume seem comfortable in the position of telling the composer how the opera should have been written, and that it is "confused" and "anti-climactic." Trust an academician to know better than anyone else what constitutes a masterpiece—until the music in question receives a fair hearing and enters into the accepted repertoire. The day for this fair hearing is fast approaching.

My third objection to Catherine Smith's contribution to the journal is to her comment about my quote on page 22, the quote wherein I state that my father did not indulge in militant racial protests in his works. Smith infers that I have denied any racial references in the music, but this is absolutely not so. I have said that Still avoided racial bitterness in his music; I have not said that he abjured racial idioms and expressions. Why Smith chooses to suggest otherwise is clear from her next reference to me, i.e., that I impute racial bitterness to anyone who may not agree with the composer. She is, no doubt, referring to my criticism of her book about my parents, making it seem that false allegations about the character and personality of Still and Arvey were philosophical disagreements. She is ignoring the fact that there is nothing philosophical or scholarly about personal attacks against public figures, especially when documents in the

Archives disprove negative allegations. In my opinion, anyone who does careful research and who then denies the kindness, honesty, generosity, mental stability, sociability, industry, and achievements of the composer and of his wife, should have his or her motives called into question.

In any case, the 27 hostile critics who panned *Troubled Island* in 1949 have won the day thus far. Their triumph will be doomed to failure, as soon as the public can bypass the constant emphasis on the composer's color, and as soon as another production is offered. Let us hope that further studies will bend our attention in this unbiased direction.

Thank you for your attention to William Grant Still.

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Editor's note: Judith Anne Still is the daughter of William Grant Still.