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Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection

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Encore presentations of the entire *Discoveries* series every Wednesday at 7:00 p.m. on WRTI-HD2

Saturday, February 7th, 2009, 5:00-6:00 p.m.

[William Grant Still](#) (1895-1978). *Kaintuck'* (1935). Richard Fields, piano, Cincinnati Philharmonia Orchestra, Jindong Cai. Centaur 2331

[William Dawson](#) (1899-1990). *Negro Folk Symphony* (1934/52). Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Neeme Järvi. Chandos 9226

Throughout their entire lives they fought prejudice and shortsightedness, but William Grant Still and William Dawson succeeded in breaking into the classical world more than most African-American composers of the 20th century. The term "African-American music" is as misleading as "American music," since there are as many different kinds of music as there are composers. It may be helpful, though, to recognize two broad groups: those who use African-American folk material and those who do not.

William Grant Still is in the second category. As his name became more widely known—and after his time studying with Varèse—he sought to write entirely original music. Still didn't want to be known primarily as a "black" composer, but as a composer. He concluded—as Amy Beach had earlier, for women—that a composer of any minority had to compete on the same playing field to be considered legitimate, even if the playing field was not level.

And compete he did. Of his many accomplishments, Still was the first African-American to have a symphony performed by a major orchestra, the first to have an opera produced by a major company, and the first to conduct a major orchestra. He composed, taught, authored books, and arranged for W.C. Handy, Artie Shaw, Paul Whiteman, and many others. He first sketched *Kaintuck'* on a train ride from Cincinnati to Louisville, and it is a naturalistic piece describing the landscape. The classical repertoire brims with works like this, from Mendelssohn to Debussy back to Beethoven and before. The prominent piano part allows *Kaintuck'* to bubble over with friendliness.

William Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony* exemplifies the first group, but Dawson had yet another battle as well. Not only did he face racial discrimination, but he was also known purely as a choral composer (anyone who's ever sung in a high school choir knows his arrangements for the Tuskegee Institute Choir), and it took some doing to get this symphony off the ground. But he went to the top, showing the score to Leopold Stokowski, who premiered it with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1934.

He populated the symphony with the spirituals he knew so well. Although Dawson tells the story of the African-American struggle through the movements "The Bond of Africa," "Hope in the Night," and "O Le' Me Shine," he trusted that it could also be heard as pure music. Like Still's music, it is awash in the American symphonic sound of the 1930s. Dawson and Still did break through into the classical world, and as we listen to some of this ravishing music by these prodigiously gifted men, it may occur to us to ask why they haven't succeeded even more.

Hosted by [Kile Smith](#), Curator of the Fleisher Collection, and [Jack Moore](#), Program Director of [WRTI](#). In *Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection* we uncover the unknown, rediscover the little-known, and take a fresh look at some of the remarkable treasures housed in the Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music, at the Parkway Central Library of the [Free Library of Philadelphia](#). The Fleisher Collection is the largest lending library of orchestral performance material in the world. For recording details, please go to our [web page](#). For a detailed list of all our shows, please visit our [archives](#).