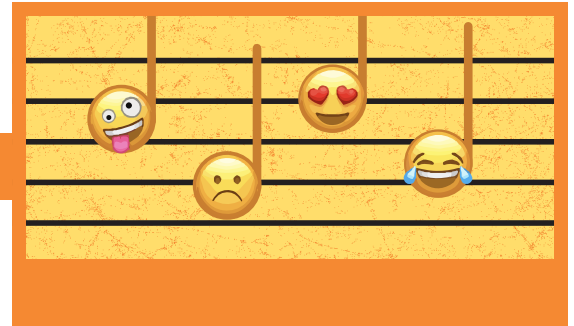


Music and Emotion

Grades 5-8



Lesson 3 — *Composer Study: William Grant Still*

Objective

Students will become familiar with the African American composer William Grant Still, with a special focus on his Afro-American Symphony, written in 1930. They will learn about his life and his work as a groundbreaking minority musician in the predominantly white industry of classical music. Students will connect his work with contemporary musicians in any musical genre that are breaking down stereotypes and broadening expectations for their field.

Suggested Materials

- Recording of Still's Afro-American Symphony, movement 4 (audio links can be found at [youtube.com/user/BfloPhilharmonic](https://www.youtube.com/user/BfloPhilharmonic))
- William Grant Still Fast Facts (provided)
- Implements for writing exercise (computer, paper and pencil, etc.)

New York State Arts Standards

MU:Pr4.2.5c	MU:Pr4.2.6c	MU:Pr4.2.7c	MU:Pr4.2.8c
MU:Re7.1.5a	MU:Re7.1.6a	MU:Re7.1.7a	MU:Re7.1.8a
MU:Re7.2.5a	MU:Re7.2.6a	MU:Re7.2.7a	MU:Re7.2.8a
MU:Re8.1.5a	MU:Re8.1.6a	MU:Re8.1.7a	MU:Re8.1.8a

Common Core Learning Standards for ELA & Literacy

Reading, CCR 1, 2, 4, 6 and 7

Writing, CCR 3, 4 and 11

Speaking & Listening, CCR 1, 2, 4 and 6

Language, CCR 1, 2, 3 and 6

Procedure

- 1) Ask students if they can identify a musical artist today that they would consider ground breaking. You can prompt a discussion about what that means — how would an artist break new ground within the music field? Would it be a result of the topics they delve into through music? Their musical technique or artistry? The way they infuse different and unique styles into a particular genre of music? Maybe it is just by nature of who they are? Ask students to share how they think their selected artist might be groundbreaking in the musical field and discuss.
- 2) Share the Composer Fast Facts sheet on Williams Grant Still with students and ask them to read it through alone or in groups.
- 3) Play a selection of Still's Afro-American Symphony, movement 4 (begin at the 5:20 mark to the end). After listening for a little while, ask them to describe the music. What types of sounds are they hearing? What qualities do they hear? What emotions might this music be depicting? How does it make them feel?

Lesson 3 — **Composer Study: William Grant Still** *(continued)*

- 4) Share some information about this piece. It was the first symphony by an African American that was performed for an American audience by a leading orchestra. The composer liked to incorporate elements of black musical culture in his pieces, and this piece uses jazzy blues progressions and rhythms. The fourth movement was originally titled, "Aspiration." It was inspired by part of a poem written by an African American poet named Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Share the poem excerpt with the students:

Be proud, my Race, in mind and soul,
Thy name is writ on Glory's scroll
In characters of fire.
High 'mid the clouds of Fame's bright sky,
Thy banner's blazoned folds now fly,
And truth shall lift them higher.

What do students think William Grant Still is trying to express in this music?

- 5) After learning about William Grant Still and hearing some of his music, ask students to describe ways that he may have been a groundbreaking artist during his day.

Extended learning:

Ask students to write a paragraph about an artist of their choosing. Using persuasive language, they should convince the reader why the artist they have chosen could be considered influential in their field. Students should be sure to express at least three reasons to support their claim. Ask students to share their writings with the class.

Fast Facts

William Grant Still

Afro-American Symphony

- Born in Woodville, Mississippi
- Started violin lessons at age 15 and taught himself to play clarinet, saxophone, oboe, double bass, cello and viola
- Attended Wilberforce University, an historically black college in Ohio, where he began composing
- Studied composition at Oberlin Conservatory of Music and New England Conservatory of Music
- Fought in World War I in the US Navy
- Became the first African-American to conduct a major symphony orchestra in the United States
- Became the first African American to have an opera produced by a major American company
- Received a Guggenheim Fellowship among many other honors
- Wrote over 150 works in his lifetime
- Died in Las Angeles, California at the age of 83



The Composer

William Grant Still became known as the “Dean of African American composers” and enjoyed success and fame within his lifetime. He was born in Woodville, Mississippi but he grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas where his mother, step-father and grandmother supported his musical studies with piano lessons, gospel music and classical music records. He was on the path to become a doctor, which was his mother’s wish, but instead he showed a huge aptitude and interest in music while attending Wilberforce University. So, he sought out and received scholarships to attend the Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio and the New England Conservatory in Boston to study composition seriously.

He had a diverse career, which included arranging music for popular bandleaders and blues composers. But he is most famous for his many pioneering milestones. In 1936 he became the first African American to conduct a major American symphony orchestra (The Los Angeles Philharmonic) and the first to have an opera produced by a major American opera company (New York City Center). He received many, many honors throughout his career, and died in Los Angeles in 1978 at the age of 83.

The Piece

Still's Afro American Symphony, which is his most well-known work, was written in 1930. It became the first piece written by an African American that was performed by a major American symphony, the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra. Each movement was inspired by a poem by African American poet, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, who was born to former slaves. Still uses some jazz rhythms and blues progressions in this piece, which was a common theme in his music.

*“I seek in the ‘Afro-American Symphony’
to portray not the higher type of colored
American, but the sons of the soil.”*

— William Grant Still