

The AMHERST COLLEGE DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC presents the

AMHERST SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

MARK LANE SWANSON, Music Director & Conductor
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WELCOME, PRESIDENT ELLIOTT & THE CLASS OF 2026!

Saturday, October 1, 2022 at 4pm
Buckley Recital Hall, Arms Music Center at AMHERST COLLEGE

SYMPHONY #3 ("SUNDAY") (1958)

William Grant Still (1895-1978)

- I. "THE AWAKENING" (Moderately fast)
- II. "PRAYER" (Very slowly)
- III. "RELAXATION" (Gaily)
- IV. "DAY'S END & A NEW BEGINNING" (Resolutely)

ANDANTE MODERATO for strings (1942)

Florence Price (1887-1953)

Suite from "BLACK BROWN BEIGE" (1943/1970)

Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington (1899-1974)
Symphonic orchestration by Maurice Peress (1930-2017)

- I. "BLACK—A WORK SONG" (Maestoso/bright swing)
- II. "BROWN—COME SUNDAY" (Andante/religioso)
- III. "BEIGE—LIGHT" (Bright swing tempo/poco pesante)

(This afternoon's concert will last approximately fifty minutes & will be performed without intermission.)

WILLIAM GRANT STILL, widely referred to as the Dean of Black American concert composers, was born May 11, 1895, in Woodville Mississippi, to Carrie Lena Fabro Still and William Grant Still Sr., both schoolteachers. Still's father died just three months later, and his mother moved them to Little Rock, Arkansas where they lived with her mother and Still grew up. Still began formal violin lessons as a teenager in Arkansas, and was an avid student who also taught himself to play oboe, clarinet, saxophone, viola, cello, and double bass. When he graduated as valedictorian from his high school, his mother encouraged him to pursue a career in medicine. To that end he studied toward a Bachelor of Science degree at Wilberforce University from 1911-1915. At Wilberforce, Still invested the bulk of his time in directing the student band, working as conductor, arranger, and general manager of the ensemble.

By 1915 he dropped out of school to pursue a full-time career in music. He enrolled in formal studies in music at Oberlin College in 1917, but his time there was interrupted by military service in the Navy from 1918-1919. When his Navy service ended, he briefly returned to Oberlin, but soon left for New York City to work with W.C. Handy and his band. In the following years, Still worked a great deal in the popular African American music of the Harlem renaissance. He worked as a band member, arranger, and tour manager for W.C. Handy. He played in the pit orchestra for the famous Broadway show "Shuffle Along" by Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle, in over five hundred performances. And he made arrangements for other notable musicians including Paul Whiteman's band, and Don Voorhees and the "Deep River Hour" radio program.

Still also studied composition formally with George Chadwick at the New England Conservatory, and with Edgard Varèse in New York. By the end of the 1920s, he had several important and well-received compositions in his catalog. His complete compositions include roughly 150 pieces, including five symphonies, several operas, ballets, and orchestral suites. He was awarded Guggenheim Fellowships in composition in 1934, 1935, and 1938. Still was awarded honorary degrees from Wilberforce University, Howard University, Oberlin, Bates, New England Conservatory, Peabody Conservatory, and the University of Southern California. Still was the first Black musician to conduct a major American orchestra, first to have a symphony premiered by a major orchestra, first to have an opera performed by a major American opera company, and first to conduct a major orchestra in the South. He passed away in Los Angeles on December 3, 1978 at the age of 83.

WILLIAM GRANT STILL'S SYMPHONY #3 ("SUNDAY") is actually the last of Still's five symphonies, and the only one never performed in his lifetime. The symphony originally wrote as his third was revised in 1958 and was reborn as his fifth ("Western Hemisphere"). The premiere performance of Still's "Sunday Symphony" did not come until 1984 when it was performed by the North Arkansas Symphony Orchestra.

Still's Third expresses the spiritual "day in the life" of a devout worshipper. Each movement has a descriptive title. The first movement, *Awakening*, begins with a bold proclamation or "call to order" in the brass leading to the main body of the movement, in which short motives are actively developed throughout the orchestra with percussive punctuation in "call and response" fashion. Especially colorful woodwind writing enhances and offsets forceful pentatonic themes.

In the second movement, *Prayer*, the English horn intones a mournful theme reminiscent of Black "spirituals." Lowered "blues" thirds and sevenths in the melody and harmony reveal connective influences between "sacred" and "secular" in African-American music.

The third movement, *Relaxation*, is a delicate and playful scherzo which makes use of rapid staccato "chattering" in the winds deftly enhanced by tambourine (a common instrument in the African-American church used here much more delicately by Still). Some of the modal brass harmonies in the center of the movement even hark back to the Renaissance and Monteverdi's opera *Orfeo* before returning to the present.

The final movement is *Day's End and New Beginning*. Its stern first theme, based on material presented in the symphony's first movement introduction, marches "resolutely" forward in repeated notes followed by strings in a beautiful contrasting lyrical section. Solo horn interjects its version of the march theme much like an encouraging congregation. And when the march theme returns in full force, it inexorably progresses to a bold and decisive finale.

In 2009, a couple began to renovate a dilapidated house they had purchased in St. Anne, a tiny community little more than an hour south of Chicago, in Kankakee County. Scattered across the floor and in piles stacked around the house, they found handwritten pages of music. Many were signed: **FLORENCE PRICE**. This had been her summerhouse, long ago abandoned. That discovery jump-started the renaissance of one of this country's important musical figures, a Black woman composer with strong ties to Chicago — and to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra — whose music had long been overlooked, neglected, and dismissed. Price had moved to Chicago with her family in 1927, making the Great Migration followed by thousands of Black Americans fleeing the terrors of living in the south and hoping to find a land of opportunity in Chicago.

Price grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas. Her father, Dr. James H. Smith, a prosperous dentist, was one of Little Rock's most highly respected Black men. She attended the same segregated schools as William Grant Still (eight years younger), another groundbreaking Black composer. In 1903, Price began studies at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, completing the four-year program in three years and graduating with diplomas in both piano and organ, the only student to receive two degrees that year. After graduation, Price set aside her musical ambitions; she returned to Little Rock to teach and lived at home with her parents. After her father died in 1910, her mother sold all the family possessions, decided to pass for white, moved back to her hometown of Indianapolis, and vanished into the society of the majority. Price moved from one teaching job to another, continued to give organ and piano recitals, married Thomas Jewell Price (the attorney who had helped settle Dr. Smith's estate), started a family, and settled into a comfortable middle-class life in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Little Rock. Aside from the song she wrote after the birth of her first child, "To My Little Son," she rarely found the time to compose anything.

But she did not give up. She spent the summers of 1926 and 1927 in Chicago, where she studied composition at Chicago Musical College — and no doubt realized that this was the place to build her career and live a better life — remote from the rising racial tension in Little Rock and the attacks and crimes and lynching that had begun to spread throughout the city, sweeping into her family's own neighborhood. Her arrival in Chicago placed her on the cusp of the Black Chicago Renaissance. But even in Chicago, composing music did not come easily. After the Depression, her husband was often without work; he grew angry and abusive. He moved out of the family house in March 1930. The next January, Price was granted a divorce and custody of their two daughters. By then, she had begun to write music on a larger scale, reflecting a new certainty that composing was her calling. The *Andante moderato* played at these concerts is an arrangement, for string orchestra, of the slow movement from a string quartet in G major that she composed in 1929. She turned 42 that year.

In January 1931, Price began the score that would change her life — a symphony in E minor, her first big orchestral piece. She worked on the score for much of the year. Sometimes, to make ends meet, she accompanied silent films on the organ in movie houses along "The Stroll," a stretch of South State Street between 26th and 39th streets, the heart of Chicago's Black community. As she struggled to put her life back together and become the composer she wanted to be, in a world that viewed her through a prism of fierce prejudices, she cannot have dreamed that the most unlikely thing would happen — that Frederick Stock and the Chicago Symphony would give the world premiere of her symphony at the 1933 World's Fair — the Century of Progress Exposition. In the summer of 1932, Frederick Stock, the music director of the Chicago Symphony, had been named music advisor for the exposition, set in Chicago to honor the city's centennial, and he began to look around for new scores that would represent the state of music in America. Although Stock did not know Price, he picked her unpublished first symphony as the centerpiece of a concert to be given on June 15, 1933, in the Auditorium Theatre. Despite the excitement and the applause at that night's concert, no one at the time entirely recognized the history-book significance of the occasion: this was the first performance of a large-scale composition by a Black woman composer given by one of the major U.S. orchestras.

Price's **ANDANTE MODERATO FOR STRINGS** is adapted from her second string quartet. It demonstrates her superb lyric and melodic gifts as well as her excellence in characteristic pieces. Price's *Andante moderato* is structured in ABCBA form and in its inner dancelike sections also seem to pay homage to Antonin Dvorak, who for so long encouraged American composers to find their own national voice by plumbing the riches of its vernacular musical traditions.

By 1942, EDWARD KENNEDY “DUKE” ELLINGTON was a national hero and one of, if not the most, recognized figure of the big band era. Black-owned and mainstream newspapers extensively covered and built up expectations for Ellington’s concert at Carnegie Hall in January 1943, recognizing the significance of a Black jazz musician performing on this stage and declaring it a moment of artistic arrival for Ellington who had started his 20-year journey to that point in D.C. jazz clubs, matured playing in Harlem’s Cotton Club, before selling out every venue on his national tours. Throughout the 1930s, Ellington continued to push the boundaries of big band composition with increasingly extended and complex works like *Symphony in Black*, *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*, and *Creole Rhapsody*. As jazz scholar and writer Greg Thomas put it, “Limiting a Duke Ellington to a three-minute record would be like confining Toni Morrison or Phillip Roth to short nonfiction.” As early as 1930, Ellington also announced his intent to write a full-scale opera. Titled *Boola*, an African word referring to Black people, it was never completed or released, but ideas and elements of its long gestation were realized in other works. The opera was divided into multiple sections according to history, rather than a traditional plot, and followed a people’s journey from Africa, into the slave trade, Civil War, and ultimately Harlem—a structure he would put to use in *BLACK, BROWN & BEIGE*.

Ellington expressed in interviews that he had the same artistic aims as Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen, who sought to reclaim the telling of Black history and recast it with dignity. In the all-white Cotton Club, where Ellington spent so many nights, the stage shows often featured Old South plantation or African jungle backdrops always intended for laughs and cast through the lens of exotic primitivism. Speaking to *San Francisco Chronicle* music critic Alfred Frankenstein in 1941, Ellington explained, “I wrote [*Boola*] because I want to rescue Negro music from its well-meaning friends... All arrangements of historic American Negro music have been made by conservatory-trained musicians who inevitably handle it with a European technique. It’s time a big piece of music was written from the inside.”

Duke Ellington officially began composing *Black, Brown and Beige* in December of 1942, roughly a month before his Carnegie Hall debut, but press from the time confirms that the 45-minute symphonic rhapsody reworks ideas and material from the opera. Not content to simply perform the music from his vast catalog, Ellington wanted to make a statement to a racially mixed Carnegie Hall audience that included the likes of Eleanor Roosevelt, Langston Hughes, Marian Anderson, Leopold Stokowski, Count Basie, and Frank Sinatra.

Introducing the piece to the audience, Ellington said, “We would like to say that this is a parallel to the history of the American Negro. And of course, it tells a long story.” The first movement, “Black,” opened with a tom-tom that evokes African drumming and serves as a unifying percussive leitmotif that re-emerges throughout the entire piece. The first theme comes in “A Work Song,” a song of burden, toil, and hardship. Despite the seriousness of his subject matter, Ellington interweaves hope and aspiration into his big band swing, marked by call and response between sections of the orchestra. Work gives way to prayer for salvation in “Come Sunday.” In its debut, the melody was carried by violin and alto saxophone, but ever the tinkerer, Ellington reworked the piece to be sung by Mahalia Jackson, which won her a Grammy Award and became a jazz standard.

The second section, “Brown,” seeks to tell the story of patriotic Black Americans fighting for their country and situates it in the Revolutionary, Civil, and Spanish-American Wars. The import of this performance, taking place at the height of WWII and even serving as a fundraiser for Russian war relief as the battle of Stalingrad raged on, offered an explicit subtext for this movement. Ellington, like many African Americans before him, hoped that patriotic service abroad might open the doors to better treatment at home. The inevitable letdown of that history culminates as “Brown” closes with “The Blues.”

Finally, “Beige” expresses a new era of progress for African Americans, highlighted by the Harlem Renaissance and economic gains. That new affluence is reflected in section titles like “Sugar Hill Penthouse,” which offers lush woodwind harmonies. But Ellington’s remarks about the piece show this wasn’t supposed to be a musical happy ending and that he saw this era as a “vener of progress” when so many had so little.

Black, Brown and Beige bewildered both jazz and classical critics alike, each group unsure what to make of its use of pure jazz or pure classical standards. While the Carnegie Hall concert was deemed a massive success for the composer, the mixed reception of *Black, Brown and Beige* limited Ellington’s ability to revive the piece in its entirety to only a handful of times after its premiere. But the ambition and craft of Ellington’s longest piece has inspired a number of great performers, including Wynton Marsalis who said the piece “sits alone in the history of jazz.”