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Howard Kissel/The Cultural Tourist
William Grant Still

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This afternoon Leon Botstein led the American Symphony Orchestra in several pieces by William Grant Still (1895-1978), whose name is often followed by the phrase "the Dean of African-American composers." As is often the case words are a much easier way to honor a man than performing his music -- he appears in concert halls and on disc far less than he should.

In his program notes Botstein mentions that one of Still's champions was Leopold Stokowski, who was in fact that founder of the American Symphony and who corresponded with Still about a piece that might be played at its debut in 1963.

In the concert at Avery Fisher Hall Botstein did a wonderful job of "framing" Still, of putting him in context. The program began with a "Rip van Winkle Overture" by George Whitefield Chadwick, a 19th century American composer, a pleasant enough composition. He followed it with Still's "Darker America," which made Chadwick really sound like "white bread."

In some ways "Darker America" was the most interesting piece on the program -- it had an arresting, somber quality, using the brass and winds to particularly mournful effect. Written in 1924, it seemed inescapably an attempt to convey the African-American experience, which it did -- powerfully.

The first half concluded with an evocative three-movement Still work called "Africa." It was composed in 1928, when American symphonic music, by white and black composers, was still searching for an American sound. Music from this period often has an impressionistic rather than a formal structure.

The piece that began the second half helped explain why Still has remained in the background. "Offrandes," by the French-born American composer Edgar Varese, is in two movements, each based on a French poem, both elegantly sung by mezzo-soprano Jennifer Rivera. It is full of sharp, fresh, prickly sounds. It is the kind of experimental music that critics loved and love, a far cry from Still's melodic work.

Its orchestration is essential to its structure -- an odd assortment of instruments rather than the traditional symphony Still employed. In retrospect it was audacious of Still as an African-American to assert his claim to the European symphonic orchestra, especially at a time when many black musicians were creating their own language with jazz.

Still followed his own muse. His Second Symphony, which closed the program, is a lush, romantic piece, which the ASO played beautifully.

The ASO has an aggressive educational outreach program. The audience was full of high school students, some of whom had designed artwork about the music, which they had listened to before coming. One is always impressed with the visual sophistication of young people today, though one should not be surprised. They live in a visual not a verbal culture.

I hope they enjoyed the concert -- it opened their ears to a variety of sounds as well as historical perspectives, which should be the aim of any thoughtful concert.