

## **Ellington & Dvořák: New Worlds**

### **ONE-MINUTE NOTES**

#### **Valerie Coleman: *Umoja***

Louisville native **Valerie Coleman** has written a splendid and inspiring ‘Anthem for Unity’ in *Umoja*. Originally for women’s chorus, this simple, appealing song has taken on a life of its own in her multiple instrumental versions. Most recently, Coleman expanded it from a short work to an impressive and powerful 10-minute orchestral tone poem. Its message is one of kindness and humanity prevailing over injustice, racism, and other evils that face us in today’s world. The message is positive and uplifting.

#### **William Grant Still: *Out of the Silence***

**William Grant Still** was the first African-American composer to establish a reputation in classical music. He synthesized European tradition with hymns, spirituals, and jazz. His *Afro-American Symphony* (1930) was the first work by a Black composer to be performed by a major orchestra. *Out of the Silence* is his orchestration of a movement from his *Seven Trageries*, a 1939 suite for solo piano. Verna Arvey, his second wife, wrote of it: “Only in meditation does one discover delicate beauties remote from the problems of earth.” This version features solo piano and strings.

#### **Duke Ellington: *New World A-Comin’***

**Duke Ellington’s *New World A-Comin’*** dates from 1943, when the USA had been at war with Japan and Germany for two years. Ellington’s big band was at the height of its popularity. His new piece was inspired by Roi Ottley’s *New World A-Coming: Inside Black America*, which had been published by Houghton Mifflin earlier that year and promptly became a best seller. Ottley’s book explored life in Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s, and the experience of being Black in wartime America. Ellington’s lush orchestral writing taps into the smooth jazz of his classic ballads, interspersed with improvisatory passages for the piano soloist.

#### **Antonín Dvořák: *Symphony No. 9, “From the New World”***

The ***New World Symphony*** was the culmination of **Antonín Dvořák's** years in the USA, when he was Director of New York's National Conservatory of Music. Bohemian dance blends with spirituals and Native American music in its themes, thereby combining the New World with the Old. Its slow movement English horn solo, popularly known as "Going Home," has become one of the best known melodies in all of classical music.

## **Valerie Coleman: *Umoja*, Anthem for Unity**

### **Valerie Coleman**

**Born:** 1970, in Louisville, Kentucky

**Composed:** 1997

**World Premiere:** September 19, 2019, in Philadelphia

**Duration:** 10 minutes

**Instrumentation:** two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, piano, and strings

Imani Winds flutist and founder Valerie Coleman is a Louisville native who came late to the field of music. She caught up quickly and has never slowed. Although she did not begin her instrumental studies until age 11, she took to music immediately. By age 14, she had won several performance competitions at the local and state levels. She had also composed three symphonies. Today, Coleman is equally well known as a composer, particularly for wind instruments. She moves comfortably between and among the worlds of jazz, classical music, and the vernacular. *Umoja* is an example of her cross-pollinated style, drawing on African-American culture, jazz call-and-response, and classical techniques.

The title *Umoja* is both Swahili for 'unity' and the first of seven days in the African diaspora celebration of Kwanzaa. Coleman's original version was for women's choir, intended as a holiday sing-along using jazz-inspired call and response. She soon arranged it for Imani Winds, and *Umoja* became a signature piece for that ensemble. Coleman has since adapted *Umoja* for wind sextet, concert band, flute choir, and full orchestra. This most recent version, commissioned in 2019, marked the first time that the Philadelphia Orchestra performed a work by a living female African-American composer.

In its orchestral guise, Coleman expanded her original 3-minute piece to an ambitious and powerful ten-minute canvas. She added an introductory segment on bowed vibraphone to pave the way for the initial melodic statement from the concertmaster. As the melody travels through the various sections of the orchestra, Coleman injects moments of dissonance that suggest the injustice and racism that challenge us in today's world. The ultimate return of the original *Umoja* melody is a reminder of our inherent humanity and goodness. *Umoja* concludes with an inspiring call for unity.

## **William Grant Still: *Out of the Silence***

**William Grant Still****Born:** May 11, 1895, in Woodville, Mississippi**Died:** December 3, 1978, in Los Angeles**Composed:** 1939; orchestrated in 1940**World Premiere:** March 14, 1942. Alfred Wallenstein and his Sinfonietta broadcast live over WOR and the Mutual Radio Network**Duration:** 4 minutes**Instrumentation:** piano and strings

No history of American music would be complete without a chapter on William Grant Still. His engaging, attractive orchestral compositions are significant examples in the development of a specifically American musical style. Further, he was the first major African-American composer to have an impact in the realm of concert music, rather than jazz. To be sure, the heritage of jazz, Negro spirituals, and traditional hymns left their own impact on Still's music, but he was able to incorporate these elements skillfully into musical forms associated with the European tradition.

Still's father, who was also a musician, died when he was a baby. His mother moved to Arkansas, where he grew up. Music was always part of his life. His grandmother, who lived with them, sang hymns and spirituals at home. After his mother remarried, the boy's stepfather took him to concerts and operettas. As an adolescent, Still started violin lessons and began composing almost immediately. He later asserted that he knew he wanted to be a composer by the time he was 16. After matriculating at Wilberforce University, he conducted and arranged music for the university band. In spite of his mother's wish that he pursue a career in medicine, the pull of music was too strong. He left Wilberforce before graduating to play in theatre orchestras and orchestrate for popular musicians, including such legends as W.C. Handy, Sophie Tucker, Paul Whiteman and Artie Shaw. Eventually Still continued his formal education at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music (interrupted briefly for military service during World War I), and subsequently studied privately with George Whitefield Chadwick and the French emigré Edgard Varèse.

Still's accomplishments would be impressive for any composer, but they are the more remarkable because he was such a trailblazer. He became the first African-American in the United States to have a symphony performed by a major orchestra when Howard Hanson led the Rochester Philharmonic in the première of the *Afro-American Symphony* 1930. That work remains his best known composition. Still was also the first African-American to conduct a major orchestra, and was one of the first to break into the prestigious realm of radio, television, and film scores.

His lovely meditation for piano and orchestra, *Out of the Silence*, began as movement four of *Seven Traceries*, a suite for solo piano. As was the case for most of his piano pieces, Still wrote it for his second wife, the pianist and journalist Verna Arvey, whom he married in February 1939. The Suite dates from the first year of their marriage. Still orchestrated *Out of the Silence* the following year. In her introduction to the published piano score, his wife wrote of it, "Only in meditation does one discover beauties remote from the problems of earth." Ms. Arvey wrote the following paragraph after the 1942 premiere of the version for piano and strings.

This composition is the fourth in a series of *Seven Traceries*, originally composed for piano and published in 1940. Dr. Still orchestrated it in the belief that it would also be effective in that form, and this proved to be the case . . . . All of the *Traceries* were said to have borne the imprint of Mysticism; this one suggests the delicate sounds that may emerge during meditation, detached from the problems of earth. – *Used by permission, William Grant Still Music, LLC*

Still's music is intimate and probing. It is also somewhat unsettling, because it eludes a firm tonal center. Gently pulsing chords explore dissonances; the solo piano replies in kind. Only when piano and orchestra play together does Still resolve to consonant chords. His lush middle section is warm and enveloping. The meditation returns to the unsettled pulsing chords of the opening segment, then concludes on an uncertain, questioning note.

## **Duke Ellington: *New World A-Comin'***

**Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington**

**Born:** April 29, 1899, in Washington, D.C.

**Died:** May 24, 1974, in New York City

**Composed:** 1943; symphonic orchestration by Maurice Peress

**World Premiere:** December 11, 1943, at Carnegie Hall in New York City

**Duration:** 10 minutes

**Instrumentation:** two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion drum set, harp, jazz trio (including some ad lib solo piano) and strings

Duke Ellington was unquestionably one of the finest composers this country has produced. His genius knew few boundaries of time or place. For more than half a century he charmed and thrilled audiences with his brilliant performances and warm style. His jazz masterpieces are immortal, and almost limitless in number: "Mood Indigo," "Ko-Ko," "Creole Love Call," "Sophisticated Lady," "It Don't Mean a Thing," "Drop Me Off in Harlem," "Take the 'A' Train," "Perdido" — the list is long. Ellington was also gifted as a concert composer, and his large symphonic works grew increasingly important to him later in his career.

When *New World A-Comin'* was premiered in December 1943, the USA had been at war for two years. Ellington and his band were near the height of their popularity, and he seized the opportunity to boost morale. He told the audience that night, "It is inspired by a great writer and a great book." He was referring to Roi Ottley's *New World A-Coming: Inside Black America*, which had been published by Houghton Mifflin earlier that year and promptly became a best seller. Ottley's book explored life in Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s and, more broadly, the experience of being Black in wartime America.

Ellington's composition, which might be described as free fantasy crossed with a one-movement piano concerto, is optimistic and idealistic. It embodies his anticipation of better times for Black people, with peace and good will throughout the world. In his autobiography, *Music is My Mistress*, Ellington recalled:

[I had] visualized this new world as a place in the distant future where there would be no war, no greed, no categorization, no non-believers, where love was unconditional, and no pronoun was good enough for God.

Ellington's lush orchestral writing taps into the smooth jazz of his classic ballads, interspersed with improvisatory passages for the soloist. At the beginning, when the orchestra and the soloist play together, the piano tends to sparkle with decorative commentary in its high register, leaving the harmonic underpinning to the full ensemble. Their interaction gradually becomes more integrated, with shared and recurring thematic material. By expanding the conventional orchestra with drum set and jazz band, Ellington incorporated some of the signature sonorities of his classic big band tunes. The walking bass is a near constant, and the wah-wah of saxophones, trombones, and jazz clarinet commingles with the warmth of strings. The piano part is vintage Ellington, at once confident and exploratory -- and it always has that swing.

## **Antonín Dvořák: Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95, "From the New World"**

### **Antonín Dvořák**

**Born:** September 8, 1841, in Mühldorf, Bohemia

**Died:** May 1, 1904, in Prague, Czechoslovakia

**Composed:** December 1892 to May 1893

**World Premiere:** December 16, 1893; Anton Sedil conducted the New York Philharmonic

**Duration:** 40 minutes

**Instrumentation:** woodwinds in pairs, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings

### **Misunderstood masterpiece**

*"In spite of the fact that I have moved about in the great world of music, I shall remain what I have always been -- a simple Czech musician."*

These words of Dvořák are uncannily apt when considering the familiar, beloved and misunderstood "New World" Symphony. Sketched and written between December 1892 and May 1893 when Dvořák had come to New York to head the new American Conservatory, the piece was ridiculed at its premiere because of its alleged incorporation of American Indian tunes. The critics did acknowledge the symphony's individuality and its unique amalgam of Czech and American elements. In fact, Dvořák never intended to directly appropriate American Negro or Indian folk song. Some years later, in 1900, he wrote to his former student Oscar Nedbal declaring of the "New World" Symphony: "I have only composed in the spirit of such American national melodies."

### **Connections to indigenous American music**

Since his first visit to the United States, Dvořák had been intensely curious about the native music of the American Indian tribes. Late in 1892, through a scholarship student at the American Conservatory, Dvořák became acquainted with America's Black spirituals as well. The young man, Henry Thacker Burleigh, played timpani and double bass in the Conservatory orchestra, and eventually became the orchestra's librarian and Dvořák's copyist. Their interaction bore rich fruit. Innumerable critics have commented on the strong echoes of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" in the first movement of the "New World" Symphony and of "Deep River" later in the work. In fact, as Dvořák's biographer Gervase Hughes has pointed out:

Folk-tunes often tended (one could put it no higher than that) to be based on a pentatonic scale -- C, D, E, G, A (or the equivalent) -- indigenous to Bohemia, Somerset, the Hebrides, Ireland and the Appalachians; furthermore the old 'plantation songs' of the 'deep south' of North America sometimes held rhythmic inflexions similar to those of Slav folk music. Dvořák had the pleasant sagacity to capitalize on these coincidences.

The result is a symphony with extraordinary and spontaneous emotional appeal. If the "New World" has its formal lapses, it amply compensates for them with rhythmic punch and a wealth of memorable, singable melodies that have made this symphony his most popular work.

The most famous movement is, of course, the delicious Largo, which opens with a startling series of coloristic modulations from distant keys: E-major to D-flat major. The immortal "Going Home" melody is said to have been inspired by Dvořák's consideration of Longfellow's *Hiawatha* as a potential opera subject. He was drawn to the legend; nothing came of that project, but his mind was clearly churning with ideas stimulated by his exposure to Black and Native American musical cultures. His English horn solo has become one of the best known melodies in all of classical music.

Structurally, the first movement is the strongest; its rhythmic profile manifests itself in one form or another in all of the succeeding movements. Dvořák wrote a true scherzo for this symphony rather than the Czech *furiant* he favored in so many other large instrumental works. And in his finale, he incorporates quotations from each of the preceding movements to cyclically unify the symphony.

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