

## PROGRAM NOTES

Quincy Symphony Orchestra  
Quincy, Illinois  
September 26, 2021

### Symphony No. 1, "Afro-American"

William Grant Still

Still's *Afro-American Symphony* is not only his most famous work, but one of the most popular American symphonies of all time. When he began sketching it in 1924, he had recently finished playing in the pit orchestra for Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle's *Shuffle Along*, the musical comedy that launched the careers of Josephine Baker and Florence Mills and, according to Langston Hughes, inaugurated the Harlem Renaissance. Still pursued other projects in the meantime but took up the symphony in earnest several years later. "It was not until the Depression struck," he explained, "that I went jobless long enough to let the Symphony take shape. In 1930 I rented a room in a quiet building not far from my home in New York and began to work." And he was inspired: the symphony was finished in two months.

Still had adopted central tenets of the Harlem Renaissance by this time, most notably philosopher (and friend) Alain Locke's concept of the new African American as an individual who would vindicate blackness from racist stereotypes and reclaim it from white exploitation. Still's use of the blues as the symphony's unifying element manifested his engagement with this idea.

While working with W.C. Handy in Memphis in 1916, he decided that "the Blues were not immoral or trivial, as some people wanted to believe, but instead an expression of the hopes and yearnings of a lowly people, wanting a better life." Musicologist Jon Michael Spencer has argued that Still's symphonic treatment of the blues allowed him to "demonstrate the inherent dignity" of black folk music as an act of racial vindication, not to critique it as inferior.

Still cast the first movement loosely in sonata form, a common three-part framework in which two melodies are introduced, developed, and reprised over the course of the movement. The first melody, played by a muted trumpet, overlays the instantly recognizable harmonic pattern of the 12-bar blues. With its sweeping arc and gentle syncopation, the second melody, introduced by the oboe, is reminiscent of a Black spiritual. The themes return in reverse order after moving through a colorful development section.

The next two movements capture distinct moods with melodic material borrowed from the first movement and transformed in new contexts. With its dark timbres, the second is a clear expression of sadness. The third, which features a banjo for local color, is a leap for joy.

The fourth movement opens with a poignant melody showcasing some of Still's most beautiful orchestral writing. A lengthy, heartbreaking passage ultimately gives way to a reminiscence of the original blues theme in a fiery coda.

Today, Still's daughter Judith believes that "the First Symphony shows him recognizing, with joy, that God had given him a gift that would change the thinking of the public."

*~Douglas Shadle, Associate Professor of Musicology, Vanderbilt University.*

### Ansel Adams: America

Chris and Dave Brubeck

*"Photographers are in a sense composers, and the negatives are their scores."* Ansel Adams (1902–1984)

In 2006 I had lunch with Susan Carson, a dynamic patron of the Arts in California. She asked me what I thought about the idea of an orchestra performing original music while Ansel Adams' photographic images were projected in the concert hall. I instantly thought this was a fabulous concept and wished it had been my idea! Ms. Carson met with me because she had been impressed with my innovative compositions created under the

auspices of the "Meet The Composer/Music Alive" program. She saw (and heard) that I was quite capable of thinking 'out of the box' when I wrote the music and script for *"Mark Twain's World"* which featured actors, not singers, with the orchestra. *"Ansel Adams: America"* would offer a different set of challenges. The key ingredient for the whole project would be to get permission from the Ansel Adams Trust to allow us to project his photographs and to create music that would enhance the visual experience. We respect the compositional integrity of Ansel Adams' art, and project the full and complete images without close-ups, panning or any other video techniques.

The merging of music and photography made perfect sense when we discovered that Ansel Adams was well on his way to becoming a serious concert pianist until he was seduced by the beauty of Yosemite and succumbed to the lure of photography. This fact inspired me to read the wonderful book "Ansel Adams, An Autobiography." In these pages I learned that Ansel as a young man yearned to practice piano while in Yosemite which led him to the old Chickering upright piano at the home of the owner of Best's Studio. While practicing there, he met, fell in love, and eventually married the proprietor's daughter, Virginia Best.

In Ansel's autobiography (which I highly recommend), I was impressed with his philosophical views, beautiful writing, and keen analysis and comparison of musical and photographic techniques. He wrote: **"Photographers are in a sense composers, and the negatives are their scores."** He was an artist and thinker whose experiences were as monumental as El Capitan. Growing up in San Francisco, Ansel Adams experienced a variety of historic events that would influence his art -- the Great Earthquake of 1906; the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in 1915 (which he experienced as part of his unique home-schooling, his father requiring him to go to the Expo every day for a year!), to the building of the Golden Gate and Bay Bridges. I thought his story was so interesting that I didn't want to simply project his photographs, but wanted to present a glimpse of his remarkable story to the audience.

Ansel Adams evolved in the expansive currents of 20th Century America. His lifelong dedication to the Sierra Club along with his powerful photographs of the American landscape helped shape the environmental movement in our country. Because of his talent, hard work, and good fortune, he became a pioneer and icon of an emerging new art form. I couldn't help but think of my father, who grew up as a cowboy in the foothills of California near Stockton. Even there, he felt the artistic influences of a booming San Francisco. These changes in the mid-20th century affected both Ansel and Dave, propelling them and their respective art forms, photography and jazz, into the new frontiers of American culture. Recognizing their similar histories spurred me to ask Dave to join me in this compositional endeavor. We had collaborated before and I enjoyed the process immensely. At age 88, Dave was reluctant to commit to such a big project. I gave my father and my mother, Lola, the Ansel Adams autobiography to read, and they were hooked!

Dave began to write a piano score that was driven in style by Bach and Chopin, immortal music learned and played by Adams as a young man. This music was also part of Dave's unusual environment, growing up on a ranch where his father was a cowboy, and his mother was a Classical pianist who often played Bach and Chopin. Dave's own style (in part inspired by his studies with Darius Milhaud after World War II at Mills College) evolved to be both polytonal and "jazzy." This heritage has naturally influenced my compositional language as well. Because the architecture of some of Adams' photographs was so like the complex structure of a Fugue, I suggested to my father that he write one to be the heart of this new composition. Dave's enthusiasm and creativity inspired him far beyond the Fugue. He devised many wonderful themes and ideas which we expanded and polished together. Once the piano score was complete, my wife Tish and I began to select additional images to be shown throughout the developing score. I continued to compose and reshape the piece and orchestrate more specifically to exact images. Dave, Lola, Tish, and I had many good times together "auditioning" different photographs to be shown with various passages of music. Jeff Sugg, an award-winning visual production designer, met with us and also added his opinions and expertise regarding transitions between the images.

The beauty of Ansel Adams' photography inspired Dave and me to create this music. We hope you'll enjoy his breathtaking photographs and the way our new composition surrounds these images.

~Chris Brubeck, Wilton, Connecticut