

**Uncovered, Vol. III:  
George Walker, Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson, William Grant Still**

*The Catalyst Quartet*

“Of course, the situation has changed today;  
it has not changed very much, but it has changed.”

- Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson  
*The Black Composer Speaks* (1978)

The lives of William Grant Still, George Walker, and Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson, which unfolded between 1895 and 2018, encompassed the regime of racial terror that characterized the US following Reconstruction; the various Black artistic, political, and social projects that transformed the US in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and the deep contradictions that continue to plague the US today. Indeed, as Perkinson said of his own position as a Black composer in the 1970s in relation to his forebears, we can say that “the situation has changed today; it has not changed very much, but it has changed.” The compositions featured here were written roughly between 1940 and 1956, and they represent Walker and Perkinson in their youths and Still in his prime. Each is a testament to these composers’ important place in the history of concert music in the US, their negotiations of competing aesthetic traditions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and their creative and deliberate engagement with what musicologist Eileen Southern referred to as “Black musical materials” in their compositional styles.

George Walker’s String Quartet No. 1 “Lyric” is in a way the most youthful music here, being the artist’s first major composition. Walker finished the quartet in 1946 while he was a student at the American Conservatory in Fontainebleau, France, just one year after he had finished his Artist Diploma at the Curtis Institute, where he had studied composition with Samuel Barber’s teacher Rosario Scalero. The abrupt and dissonant opening gesture of the first movement quickly gives way to a harmonic lushness that portends the middle movement, which remains one of his best remembered works and is often performed alone as the Lyric for Strings. The opening movement continues inquisitively, alternating between showcasing Walker’s artful counterpoint and his capacity to weave rhapsodic melodies. The surprisingly hushed ending serves as a transition to the opening bars of the Lyric, in which the four instruments enter one by one until they have built the lush bed on which the aching melody in the first violin floats. After a dramatic climax in the middle of the movement, the quartet slowly makes its way back to the opening theme, coming to rest on a rich F-sharp Major triad. The stormy opening of the third and final

movement comes as a bit of a surprise, then, and its dramatic, rhythmically charged melodies pass between each performer before an acrobatic flourish in the first violin cues the tutti chord that closes the piece.

Born in Washington, D.C., in 1922, Walker studied piano and composition at Howard University, the Oberlin Conservatory, and the Eastman School of Music, in addition to Curtis and Fontainebleau. In 1945, he performed Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Eugene Ormandy as the winner of the Philadelphia Youth Auditions. Inspired by his composition studies and frustrated with a lack of opportunities as a performer, he turned to composing and to teaching. While working at Smith College and, later, Rutgers University, he composed dozens of pieces for strings, piano, voice, and orchestra, fulfilling commissions from the Cleveland Orchestra, the Atlanta Symphony, and the National Endowment for the Arts. His music travels confidently between the sometimes-competing strains of serialism and tonalism in 20<sup>th</sup>-century US American concert music, and he drew heavily from Black performance traditions. Walker died in 2018 in Montclair, New Jersey, leaving a legacy of firsts: He was the first Black person to graduate from the Curtis Institute, the first Black person to receive a doctorate from Eastman, and the first living Black composer to win the Pulitzer Prize for music, which was awarded to him in 1996 for *Lilacs, for voice and orchestra*.

When Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson finished his String Quartet No. 1 "Calvary" in 1956, he was roughly the same age Walker had been when he finished the "Lyric." Born in New York City in 1932, his mother named him after the Afro-British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. Perkinson studied composition and conducting at NYU, the Manhattan School of Music, Princeton University, the Tanglewood Music Center, and the Mozarteum in Salzburg. Perkinson had a tremendously diverse career, co-founding the Symphony of the New World, the first racially integrated orchestra in the US; conducting the Brooklyn Community Symphony Orchestra; and collaborating with jazz and popular performers like Max Roach, Marvin Gaye, and Harry Belafonte. His richly varied output included works for solo instruments, orchestral pieces, ballets, film score, and music for theater. Like Walker, Perkinson had a wide-ranging aesthetic that flirted with serialism at times and consistently evinced his sustained engagement with diverse Black musical forms. At the time of his death in 2004, he was serving as the director of the New Black Music Repertory Ensemble at Columbia College Chicago's distinguished and pathbreaking Center for Black Music Research, where he was able to champion the work of Black composers.

Perkinson composed “Calvary” while living in New York City after finishing his master’s at the Manhattan School of Music. The quartet’s debut performance in 1956 speaks to the breadth of Black networks in the arts during this period: It was premiered at Carnegie Hall as part of a memorial concert for the distinguished Black composer and baritone Harry T. Burleigh. The concert was put on by the Margaret Bonds Chamber Music Society, named after the prominent Black composer and pianist who founded it. And the *International Dictionary of Black Composers* (1999) lists the performers as the Cumbo Quartet, which I presume included the renowned Black cellist Marion Cumbo. “Calvary” is based loosely on the spiritual of the same name, which Perkinson had heard growing up in church. Its opening statement launches the first movement into a string of harmonically searching repetitions and transformations. The quartet eventually melts into the lilting second theme, but it is the rhythmic insistence of the opening theme that shapes the movement’s forceful and expansive close. A plaintive viola solo opens the second movement, interrupted by chromatic interjections from the cello and second violin that cajole the viola into joining. By the middle of the movement, however, the whole ensemble is collaborating toward the piece’s soaring lyricism, and then the coda returns to the initial viola solo. The propulsive third and final movement opens with a syncopated, dissonant gesture that gives way to an uninhibited melody in the first violin that is layered on top of a kinetic accompaniment from the other instruments. Halfway through, Perkinson reintroduces the Calvary theme, which he renews through a series of rhythmic and harmonic treatments before the same declamatory tag that closed the first movement brings the piece to its end.

William Grant Still, the senior composer on this album, is often referred to as the “Dean of African-American Classical Composers,” and he was one of the most important composers in the history of the United States. The Lyric Quartette, though published in 1960, was likely composed between 1939 and 1945, while Still was writing in what he referred to as his “universal idiom.” After a middle period that incorporated aesthetic ideas from spirituals, jazz, and the blues, Still expanded his musical vocabulary during this third era to encompass the sounds of Native Americans, people in Latin America and the Caribbean, and settlers in the US. The three movements of the Lyric Quartette speak to this, with each aiming to musically represent a plantation, the mountains of Peru, and a pioneer settlement, respectively. The original title for the piece shows that the movements were also conceived as *Musical Portraits of Three Friends*. The first movement opens with a placid, lilting melody in G Major before embracing touches of chromaticism in its second theme. The first violin indulges in a wandering solo, and then the movement concludes by returning to its opening

material. The second movement, purportedly based on an Incan melody, relies on an insistent pulse and hushed intimacy to convey its melancholic, nostalgic themes. Finally, the bouncy third movement lets loose into a dance-like middle section before offering the piece a fiery coda.

Still was born in Woodville, Mississippi, in 1895 and grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas. He attended the historically Black Wilberforce University in Ohio, participating avidly in musical life there, before continuing his musical education at Oberlin. In 1919, Still moved to New York, where he worked in a broad range of musical scenes, including W. C. Handy's band—central to era's blues revival—and Broadway. Eventually, Still turned his attention to concert music composition, studying with the composers George Chadwick and Edgar Varèse. The premiere of his *Afro-American Symphony* in 1931 by the Rochester Philharmonic, under the direction of composer Howard Hanson, marked the first performance by a major orchestra of a large symphonic work written by a Black composer. His career reached a peak in the late 1930s and 1940s, which saw the premiere of his choral work *And They Lynched Him on a Tree* by the New York Philharmonic in 1940, the commission of his *Poem for Orchestra* by the Cleveland Orchestra in 1944, and the first performance of his opera *Troubled Island* in 1949. During the last few decades of his life, Still struggled against the shifting aesthetic and social expectations of the times, as avant-garde composers and the Black Arts Movement rose in prominence within Still's own art worlds. Nevertheless, by any measure the tremendously prolific Still, who died in Los Angeles in 1978, remains a towering figure in the history of concert music in the US.

If William Grant Still, George Walker, and Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson share exceptionally fruitful and diverse careers that brought them into the most coveted spaces of the concert music art world, they also struggled at various points to get their music adequately performed, published, and recorded. Their biographies leave no doubt as to their stature, and hopefully the renewed interest in their compositions will, however belatedly, chip away at the dynamics that often hindered the circulation of their work.

- M. Myrta Leslie Santana