



## HARMONY ACROSS BARRIERS: The Equalizing Spirit of Music

*Musical voices transcending barriers of acceptance, in our January program*

Close your eyes and see with your ears - how important is race to how we hear, musically, and how does race inform music itself? When we think of classical music, do we reflexively see white, and when we think of jazz, do we automatically see black?

Among North America and Europe's finest composers, **Samuel Coleridge-Taylor** and **William Grant-Still** were as famous in their time as **George Gershwin**, yet not as well-known. Across the Atlantic, Englishwoman **Betty Roe** was taking piano lessons in London during the second world war and still lives on the block where she grew up, yet her music could be heard at a juke joint in Mississippi.

Did the success of America's most famous composers, like George Gershwin - who wrote art music in a jazz vein - and Duke Ellington - who wrote jazz in a classical, or art music, vein - dim the lights on equally compelling voices: black composers who wrote great art music?

Can musicians of any race or gender write or perform music originating elsewhere?

**Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's** large-scale cantata, *Hiawatha*, was as popular in its time as Handel's *Messiah*, garnering accolades everywhere, including the White House, where he was received by President Theodore Roosevelt. At times mysterious and exciting, noble and engaging, Coleridge-Taylor invites comparisons to Antonin Dvorak or Edward Elgar. While he wrote many pieces in an attractive Western style, he also infused his music with folk elements from West Africa - his father emigrated from Sierra Leone - and African-American spirituals.

A giant of the American music scene in the mid-20th century, **William Grant Still** was the first African-American composer to have a symphony performed by major orchestras (the Berlin Philharmonic, in January 1933, and the London Symphony Orchestra), the first to have an opera staged with a major company (the New York City Opera), and the first African-American to conduct a major symphony (the Los Angeles Philharmonic). Proficient in styles ranging from film music, to operas, to symphonies, and also smaller-scale works such as *lieder* and chamber music, his voice was lost despite his renown in the tumult of popular styles and changing tastes around the mid-century.

Although **George Gershwin's** opera *Porgy and Bess* may seem popular now, with regular stagings at major opera houses and Broadway revivals, it took decades for audiences to accept his folk opera's embrace of southern, impoverished African-American culture. Despite how attractive the music was, many were uncomfortable with then-unheard of elements in the production, such as an all-black, classically-trained cast depicting the workaday lives of the poor - was it racist? Was it true? Did a Jewish white man actually write such jazzy, swinging music?

Finally, **Betty Roe** wrote her *Madam Songs* with the poetry of Langston Hughes, a key figure of New York City's Harlem Renaissance. Drawing on American jazz and blues, these vignettes are soulful compliments to the great cultural contributions of African Americans, written by a white European.

Join us as we explore these intriguing questions, through hearing music from different sides of America's heritage.