

William Grant Still

Born – 1895– Woodville, Mississippi
Died – 1978 – Los Angeles, California

William Grant Still was born in a small town in Mississippi. While William's father died when he was only a few months old, his mother remarried and William had a stepfather who truly nurtured his appreciation for music. Together they went to operettas and listened to records of classical music, and William was eventually provided with the opportunity to take violin lessons and gain a deeper understanding of music. William first went to college to become a doctor, but after a short time decided to focus on music. He studied at such major music schools as Oberlin and the New England Conservatory. He wrote over 200 works, including ballets, symphonies, operas, chamber music pieces and other works for radio and television.

William Grant Still was a true pioneer in American music. He was the first African-American to:

- * write a major orchestral work which was performed by a major American orchestra.
- * conduct a major symphony orchestra in the United States.
- * direct a major symphony orchestra in the Deep South.
- * conduct a major American network radio orchestra.



William Grant Still's String Quartet Music

String Quartets featured in "Circle Unbroken"

Lyric Quartet

Lyric Quartet was written in 1960, and is considered one of the most intricate and significant works for string quartet by William Grant Still. This piece is subtitled "Music Portraits of Three Friends" is in three movements:

- The Sentimental One
- The Quite One
- The Jovial One

Danzas De Panama

The Panama Dances, written in 1948, were based on folk themes collected by violinist and composer Elizabeth Waldo. Still made every effort to approximate the sounds of the native instruments, and as such the dances make great use of percussive effects on the instruments – when musicians tap and strike the wooden parts of their instruments.

Danzas exists in four movements, with each title using the name of a different Panama dance.

- Tamborito
- Mejorana
- Punto
- Cumbia



William Grant Still's String Quartet Music

Activity 7 – Characters in Music

William Grant Still's *Lyric Quartet* is subtitled "Music Portraits of Three Friends" with each movement using music to paint a picture of a friend.

Without telling the students the movement titles, listen to tracks 12 (excerpt from the first movement - The Sentimental One) and 13 (the complete third movement - The Jovial One). First see if the students can determine which title fits which music, then discuss how the music reflects the titles of each movement.

- The Sentimental One *What does sentimental mean? How does the music sound sentimental? Is it fast or slow music? Is it loud or soft?*
- The Jovial One *What does Jovial mean? How does the music sound happy? Is it fast or slow?*

South Carolina State Standards

General Music:

VI.C,D

IX.A,B,D

Language Arts:

3-2

Materials:

In-class demonstration
by violinist and cellist of
Chamber Music
Charleston,
Accompanying CD
tracks: 13 and 14

William Grant Still's String Quartet Music

Activity 8 – Classical Crossover

Incorporating sounds of native instruments into the classical string quartet

A cellist and violinist from Chamber Music Charleston will visit with smaller classes to demonstrate techniques used to make their classical instruments sound like drums and other native instruments (techniques such as tapping). Musicians will also play a selection of musical themes from *Danzas de Panama* that captures the spirit of dancing.

The accompanying CD (tracks 15-17) may be used to demonstrate native dances of Panama performed on original non-classical instruments. Tracks 18 and 19 show two examples where William Grant Still employed the tapping technique on the string instruments to produce a percussive effect.

South Carolina State Standards

General Music:

VI.C,D

IX.A,B,D

Language Arts:

3-2

Materials:

In-class demonstration by violinist and cellist of Chamber Music Charleston, Panama Drum printout (from *Supplemental Worksheets*), Accompanying CD tracks: 15-19