

The Introduction of the Black Conductor

AKEILA THOMAS; FACULTY SPONSOR: DR. JAMIE WEAVER

The conductor has become a position of great influence and necessity to the performing ensemble due to innovations in performance between the Baroque and mid to late Romantic periods. With such prominence given to the title, one such conductor has gained very little mention throughout the course of music's history. African-American musicians have played such a catalytic role in the shape and progression of Western music. Thorough research demonstrates that general knowledge of the influence of black conductors has developed slowly and has been largely overlooked. My research was conducted to determine the importance of the black conductor and his contribution to American music.



<http://www.contraappuntoblog.org/2012/03/15/william-grant-still-1895-1978/>
<http://everyguyed.com/lookbook/style-icon-jazz-musicians>
<http://du/m/www.baylor.eediacomunications/news.php?action=story&story=38383>
<http://africlassical.blogspot.com/2012/04/john-malveaux-african-american.html>

- I narrowed my focus to the four genres that were the most prominent in America during the early to mid 20th century: The Symphony, Jazz, The Negro Spiritual and Opera.
 - I researched the lives, compositions and accomplishments of conductors William Grant Still, Duke Ellington, Anton Armstrong, and Henry Lewis. These conductors were the most influential African-Americans in these genres.
 - I studied the scores, listened to recordings and watched performances of their works in order to gain a more personal view of their ideals in music.
- My research allowed me to see that the black conductor is specific only to American music genres. Due to the relatively recent emergence of prominent American composers and conductors during the 20th century, the influence of the black conductor is seemingly omitted from the concise telling of music's history.
 - Each conductor infused some aspect of black culture into music and inadvertently encouraged others to do the same.
 - **William Grant Still** composed pieces such as his *Afro-American Symphony* which incorporated elements of blues and Negro Spirituals. Many of his operas were set in the the south and depicted the lives of African-Americans.
 - **Duke Ellington** capitalized on the celebration of black culture during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920's. He was a catalytic composer and band leader during this movement and he allowed his experiences to shape his conducting style. He has since become one of the most important names regarding Big Band, Jazz, and the Harlem Renaissance.
 - **Anton Armstrong** is the first African-American conductor of the St. Olaf choir at St. Olaf College in Minnesota. This ensemble has an extensive history of performing religious and sacred works across the country and internationally. Each conductor at St. Olaf has left an impression on the group and added a characteristic specific to themselves. Armstrong added the Negro Spiritual to the repertoire of the choir due to the religious context of many of the works.
 - In 1972, **Henry Lewis** was the first African-American to conduct an opera at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. He was an advocate of the arts and encouraged African-Americans to pursue careers as serious musicians. This was uncommon, even during the 1960's and 70's because young black people were experiencing another stream of pride in their culture

The African-American conductor has given new insight to the ideas associated with American music culture. Jazz and the Negro Spiritual are both genres that tell of specific points in the culture and history of a people. Although, Opera and the Symphony were not originated in America, the impression of African-American influence is what sets them apart from previous European works of the same genres.