



PAUL-ELLIOTT COBBS
CONDUCTOR

With one of the first definitive recordings of William Grant Still's Afro-American Symphony in 1990, Paul-Elliott Cobbs established himself as a rare authority on conducting culturally authentic African American classical and symphonic works.

Although he was educated in the cradle of 18th century classicism and 19th century romanticism at the Akademie für Musik, Vienna, Maestro Cobbs grew up in an atmosphere that celebrated the more well-known African American Gospel music. "Long before I conducted Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms I conducted Gospel music."

The son of a long line of Baptist preachers, he directed Detroit's New Liberty Baptist young adult choir, in a church whose members included a young Della Reese. Musically, Cobbs lived in two worlds: "I always kept the two styles separate. At home and church on Sundays it was Gospel. At school it was the three Bs – Brahms, Beethoven and Bach."

It wasn't until he began his doctoral thesis work that he stumbled across William Grant Still. "I had never heard of him," the Maestro recalls, dismayed at the obscurity of the African American composer. He recalls discovering at the same time that the rare few musicological works written on African American composers were not written by African Americans. "The people who were black and performing the music did not have the expertise to present it in a forum that was conducive to academia. I felt an obligation to address this; I was in a unique position to do so."

Prior recordings of Still's symphony by the Vienna Opera Orchestra in the 1940s and the London Symphony in the 1970s were not culturally authentic, according to Cobbs, because the conductors had approached the text from a classic eurocentric perspective.

"In 20th century eurocentric music, the composers are very specific about what they want. They write it down," Cobbs says. "Black music often depends on oral tradition. Unless the conductor has a sense of how it should be performed, all you get is what's written and you miss the essence of the style. Most of the stylistic nuances in black music are not things written on the page."

Cobbs' approach centered on explaining to his symphony each of the African American idioms in Grant's work. "I would sing to them what was written on the page, and then what it should sound like, showing them what was different. For example, in spirituals there's a prevalence of lowered thirds and lowered sevenths. We want to push those notes down pitch-wise. If there's a raised fourth, you want to scoop up to it."

His graduate work culminated in his recording with the Everett Symphony in which Americans of largely Scandinavian background played with cultural authenticity. "When we played the blues part, we played them as the blues. And when we played the spiritual part, we gave the harmonic melodic inflections the way the old timers would do it."

Cobbs has performed Still's work many times since, and has added other African American symphonic and classical works to his repertoire. "African American influence on classical music is an undiscovered treasure. Debussy was influenced by African American idioms. On his deathbed, Brahms talked about using ragtime in one of his symphonies. I am committed to sharing this rich history with symphonies and audiences."



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Selected Repertoire

Harry Burleigh
Samuel Coleridge-Taylor
Nathaniel Deft
Duke Ellington
James Johnson
Ulyssess Kay
Hale Smith
William Grant Still
Howard Swanson
George Walker

Additional repertoire and performance information available upon request.

For more information on Maestro Cobbs' programs celebrating the work of African American composers please call: 800-788-7405
or write info@pauelliottcobbs.com

