



chicago **sinfonietta**

PAUL FREEMAN, MUSIC DIRECTOR THOMAS DE WALLE, GENERAL MANAGER

188 WEST RANDOLPH STREET SUITE 1601 CHICAGO, IL 60601 p312 236 3681 f312 236 5429 chicagosinfonietta.org

ARTISTIC QUALITY 10/10

BY VICTOR CARR JR. | SPECIAL TO CLASSICSTODAY.COM

AFRICAN HERITAGE SYMPHONIC SERIES I

SAMUEL COLERIDGE-TAYLOR

Danse Nègre from African Suite;
Petite Suite de Concert

WILLIAM GRANT STILL

Symphony No. II "Afro-American"

FELA SOWANDE

African Suite (selections)

Chicago Sinfonietta, Paul Freeman

Cedille – 90000 055 (CD),

Reference Recording – Still: Järvi (Chandos)

"We are in for a treat," promised Virginia Williams, filling in for her absent son, the mayor, Tuesday evening in the Kennedy Center Concert Hall. "This," she added, "is a different kind of music."

Cedille Records intends its African Heritage Symphonic Series as a follow-up to CBS Records' Black Composers Series from the 1970s, and I'm happy to say Volume I makes for a strong start. Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912), chiefly remembered for his cantata based on Longfellow's *Hiawatha*, actually was British-born, and his music is understandably more European sounding than that of his African American colleagues, though in some cases you can hear instances of traditionally African harmonic modulations. Thus, the *Danse Nègre* from the *African Suite* (1898) sounds sort of like Vaughan-Williams' *The Wasps* spiced up by Dvorak's *Slavonic Dances*. Dvorák is a composer who comes to mind again in the *Petite Suite de Concert* (1910), where Coleridge-Taylor exhibits the same qualities of tunefulness, rhythmic fluency, and sparkling orchestration as the Czech master.

William Grant Still (1895-1978) greatly admired Coleridge-Taylor, but he also was heavily influenced by the great jazz musicians of his time, in particular W.C. Handy, known as the "Father of the Blues". It's the sound of the blues that opens Still's *Symphony No. 1*, and to hear it in full symphonic dress immediately calls to mind George Gershwin (both composers knew each other's music). Various forms of jazz and blues permeate the symphony, yet Still constructs his work according to classic symphonic principles, and the result is a highly original, thought-provoking, and ultimately enjoyable creation.



From the African diaspora, we turn to the motherland for the music of Fela Sowande (1906-87). Sowande's *African Suite* (1930) utilizes traditional melodies of his native Nigeria, allowing us to hear the actual modes and rhythms of Africa presented in European orchestral timbres—a hybrid that works thanks to conductor Paul Freeman's rhythmic exactitude and to enthusiastic playing by the Chicago Sinfonietta. Freeman and his band give vibrant performances of the Coleridge-Taylor works as well, and show a far less self-conscious demeanor in the Still *Symphony* than Neeme Järvi and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, playing with much more relaxed authenticity and "cool". Cedille's recording is a model of three-dimensional realism, making this disc both a sonic and musical treasure.

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MUSIC EXCELLENCE DIVERSITY



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AFRICAN HERITAGE

BY TIM SMITH | THE BALTIMORE SUN MUSIC CRITIC |
FEBRUARY 7, 2002

AFRICAN HERITAGE SYMPHONIC SERIES, VOLUME II
CHICAGO SINFONIETTA; PAUL FREEMAN, CONDUCTOR.
(CEDILLE RECORDS CDR 90000 061)

The world of classical music has a pretty decent record of color-blindness, but curious shortcomings are still easy to spot. One of them involves music by composers who happen to be black. Too often, their work is reserved for Black History Month or concerts honoring Martin Luther King Jr. It's absurd that such music is not more a part of the mainstream of programming with American orchestras.

Paul Freeman, founding music director of the Chicago Sinfonietta, has devoted much of his time to correcting this oversight since at least the 1970s. Anyone curious to know what we have been missing in concert halls will get a good idea from Freeman's "African Heritage Symphonic Series" recordings for Cedille Records, one of the fine small labels making up for the steady cutback in classical products from the big-name companies.

Like last year's release, Volume II contains vibrant accounts of substantive repertoire by a distinctive cross-section of black composers, not all of African-American descent, all but one still living. It adds up to a compelling collection.

Pulitzer Prize-winning George Walker is represented by his exquisite *Lyric for Strings* from 1941. Orchestras tired of dragging out Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* would do well to consider this score.

Although it does not aim for quite the cathartic release as Barber's well-worn music, *Lyric* reveals a similar affinity for rich, unapologetic romanticism in melody, harmony and gesture. The piece never sounds predictable or clichéd. It's a gem.

Hale Smith's *Ritual and Incantations* from 1974 packs quite a punch. If the writing sometimes suggests the soundtrack to a horror film, the craftsmanship is always solid, the variety of expression considerable in this moody, evocative work. The percussion writing is particularly imaginative.

Ulysses Kay's *Overture to Theater Set* from 1968 makes a forceful curtain-raiser, with occasional moments for reflection and even a little suspense.

Panamanian-born Roque Cordero is represented by his *Eight Miniatures for Small Orchestra* from 1948. Most of the Latin-flavored movements are under two minutes, yet each covers a lot of interesting, vividly orchestrated ground.

Adolphus Hailstork is represented by the propulsive, jazzy *An American Port of Call* from 1985 and *Epitaph for a Man Who Dreamed* from 1979. The latter, intended as a memorial to King, eschews anger or lamentation in favor of great eloquence. The music conveys not only a calm acceptance of loss, but, more importantly, an inner faith in the eventual triumph of King's philosophy.

Freeman conducts all of these compositions with obvious conviction and attention to detail, coaxing stylish, generally firm playing from the Sinfonietta.



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AFRICAN SYMPHONIC HERITAGE SERIES, VOLUME II

CD REVIEW BY JOHN MCGRODY | FOR CEDILLERECORDS.ORG

Cedille Records has released Volume II of its *African Heritage Symphonic Series* with the Chicago Sinfonietta conducted by its Founding Music Director Paul Freeman. Five composers are represented here, in splendid recordings made in Lund Auditorium at Dominican University, River Forest, Illinois.

This CD opens with the Overture from the orchestral suite *Theater Set* by Ulysses Kay (1917-1995), first performed by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra under Robert Shaw in 1968. Kay's teachers and mentors included William Grant Still, Howard Hanson, Bernard Rogers, Paul Hindemith, and Otto Luening. According to legend, it was the saxophone that first captured Mr. Kay's heart, though he was persuaded to give the piano no less attention by his Uncle Joe in Chicago—a jazz master better known as King Oliver.



Born in 1922, George Walker considered himself primarily a pianist. He was one of the first African Americans to attend the Curtis Institute, where he studied piano with Rudolf Serkin and Mieczyslaw Horszowski; he later studied with Robert Casadesu, Clifford Curzon, and Nadia Boulanger.

In the 1970s, Mr. Walker's orchestral music began to receive some deserved attention through Maestro Freeman's recordings. And in 1996 he became the first living African American composer to win the Pulitzer Prize. He wrote his heartfelt *Lyric for Strings* in 1941 as a memorial to his grandmother.

In 1943, the first orchestral score of Roque Cordero (born in Panama in 1917) was discovered and championed by Dmitri Mitropoulos, then music director of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, who funded Cordero's study with composer Ernst Krenek in St. Paul, Minnesota. There, Mr. Cordero began to unite serial techniques with folk idioms from his native land, thus elevating popular music to concert hall fare, as did Schubert with waltzes, Joplin with rags, and William Grant Still with the blues. Cordero's *Eight Miniatures for Small Orchestra* date from 1948.

Ritual and Incantations by Hale Smith (born in 1925) was premiered by the Houston Symphony Orchestra under Maestro Freeman in 1974. As CD annotator Dominique-René de Lerma points out, its extensive percussion is based on idealized African drumming. And though Mr. Smith offers no program for the piece, it creates "an atmosphere of mystery with decidedly sinister undercurrents."

Two works by Adolphus Cunningham Hailstork (born in 1941) are presented on this disc: *An American Port of Call* from 1985, commissioned by the Virginia Symphony Orchestra, and *Epitaph: For a Man Who Dreamed*, composed in 1979 in memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., after a decade of reflection. As Mr. De Lerma notes, it is "a work of transcendent beauty that conveys the nobility of its subject, and serves as a tribute of acceptance."

AFRICAN HERITAGE SYMPHONIC SERIES, VOLUME II

Ulysses Kay: Overture to *Theater Set*, 1968 (4:28)
George Walker *Lyric for Strings*, 1941 (5:17)
Roque Cordero *Eight Miniatures for Small Orchestra*, 1948 (11:47)
Adolphus Hailstork *An American Port of Call*, 1985 (8:32)
Hale Smith *Ritual and Incantations*, 1974 (12:45)
Adolphus Hailstork *Epitaph: For a Man Who Dreamed*, 1979 (7:37)

Chicago Sinfonietta/Paul Freeman. Cedille Records
CDR 90000 061, total playing time 51:02.

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PAUL FREEMAN, MUSIC DIRECTOR THOMAS DE WALLE, GENERAL MANAGER

AFRICAN HERITAGE SYMPHONIC SERIES, VOLUME II ORCHESTRAL WORKS BY CORDERO, HAILSTONE, KAY, SMITH

CD REVIEW BY JOHN VON RHEIN | CHICAGO TRIBUNE |
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2002

CHICAGO SINFONIETTA, PAUL FREEMAN CONDUCTOR
(CEDILLA)

The Chicago-based Cedilla label has released the second three volumes of conductor Paul Freeman's series devoted to orchestral works by African-American composer. It is useful and important to be able to hear symphonic works by African-American composers whose contributions have gone largely unrecognized.

There is no single style common to these composer, whose works cut a wide swath through the postwar modernism postwar modernist and post modernist era.

George Walker's tenderly elegiac "Lyric for Strings" (1941) is probably the only piece most symphony-goers will have heard of. Although the Walker piece is the standout, each of the remaining works is well made and worth hearing. They are Hale Smith's sinister, atmospheric "Ritual and Incantations" (1979); Ulysses Kay's Coplandesque "Overture to Theater Set" (1968); and Roque Cordero's pithy "Eight Miniatures for Small Orchestra" (1948).

Those interested in exploring an almost invisible corner of recent American music history will find the Cedilla series valuable, with performances and recording comparable to that of the music itself.

