

George Walker

Great American Chamber Music

Credits

William Anderson, Cygnus Ensemble.

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Tania Leon

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Producer: George Walker

Recording Engineer: George Walker (String Quartets and Songs)

Editing /Mastering: Jeremy Tressler, Dream flower Studio

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ALBANY RECORDS U.S.
915 BROADWAY, ALBANY, NY 12207
TEL: 518.436.8814 FAX: 518.436.0643

ALBANY RECORDS U.K.
BOX 137, KENDAL, CUMBRIA LA8 0XD
TEL: 01539 824008

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The Music

String Quartet No. 1

With this first recording of the *String Quartet No. 1* composed by George Walker at age 24 in 1946, the famous *Lyric for Strings* (2nd movement) can be heard in its original context. It becomes the “Flower in the Crannied Wall,” described in the well-known poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson. Encompassed by the imposing structures of the first and third movements of this string quartet, its affecting emotional quality is self-evident. The *String Quartet No. 1* was written a few months after George Walker's highly acclaimed New York debut in Town Hall that was followed two weeks later by the success of his appearance with the Philadelphia Orchestra in Rachmaninoff's *Third Piano Concerto*.

The vigorous ascending motive of the first movement is followed by a descending interval of a perfect fourth and a triplet that become essential elements in its construction. Contrasting thematic material and a development section create an easily recognizable sonata form.

In the second movement the introduction of six measures contains the first notes of the principal theme. They are stated “*espressivo*” in the viola part. The linearity of this thematic material continues in the first violin part of the principal section. It alternates between major and modal scalar patterns. The brief, static, contrasting section is the first of two significant third relationships that occur in the movement. This sections returns at its conclusion.

The appearance of the dotted eighth and sixteenth in the first measure of the third movement generates the intensity of this *Allegro con fuoco*. A lyrical quality is present even in the most dramatic parts of the rondo form. An extended coda transforms the principal motive using augmentation to establish a moment of tranquility before the playfulness of the penultimate measures. The solo by the first violin concluding the movement states the initial motive in diminution.

String Quartet No. 2

Composed in 1968, this work received its New York premiere in a Town Hall concert in September of that year. The rapturous review that appeared in the *New York Times* asserted its importance in a program that included the Beethoven *String Quartet, op. 95*. The revision of 1987 consists mostly of note changes in the first movement that do not affect the length and shape of the composition. In the first movement, an introduction of three measures is followed by soloistic outbursts in an indeterminate and improvisatory mosaic of arched climaxes and unusual cadences.

The skittish, highly syncopated beginning of the second movement corresponds to the scherzo movement in string quartets from the first Viennese classical period. In this song form (ABA) the melodic content appears in the “B” section. It diverges from the tripartite classical form by including a transition inserted before the return of the “A” section and its coda. The third movement is characterized by a considerable use of pizzicati punctuating sustained notes. The final chord achieves its poignancy by being played *forte con sordino* by the second violin and *sul tasto* by the other three instruments.

The fourth movement begins *Adagio (quasi recitativo)*. An ascending cello line merges with that of the viola to introduce the first notes of a fugal subject. The subject is then presented in its entirety by the second violin. The highly chromatic content of the subject belies its baroque derivation even as subsequent entries comply with tonic-dominant relationships in a four part exposition. Following the exposition, syncopated chords alternate with intervallic material derived from the subject. Stretto techniques are utilized before the first violin presents an irregularly shaped melodic idea taken up in a succeeding phrase by the second violin. The next section abounds in developmental techniques and inversions before the recurrence of the first contrasting section that is limited to one extended phrase. The *piu mosso* of the octave passage in the coda terminates in well-spaced syncopated chords.

Piano Sonata No. 4

Commissioned by Frederick Moyer in memory of Roberta Pew-Bandy by the Astral Foundation, the *Piano Sonata No. 4*, a work in two movements, was given its New York premiere by Moyer in Alice Tully Hall in 1985. The declamatory opening measures reappear after figurative and octave passages. A transition leads to contrasting material containing octave displacements that create a jagged melodic contour. Demanding pianistic sections precede a middle section characterized by a sustained melodic line punctuated by staccato notes. A transition leads into a less chromatic melodic section that is interrupted by dramatic outbursts. The return of the principal theme is followed by a stream of sixteenth notes and octaves that progress to a resolute finality.

The second movement begins with the principal theme of the first movement stated in retrograde. The introduction consists of three phrases, two symmetrical and the third asymmetrical. Repeated notes on F sharp signal the transition to a section of metrical irregularity, sixteenth notes of hammer-like intensity that eventually dissipate into a pianissimo chord. Waltz-like material emerges and becomes more lyrical before subsiding into a quiet cadence. A transition ascending into a reiteration of propulsive seconds (major and minor combined), double notes, octaves interlocking with single notes leads into a softly quoted fragment of the spiritual, *Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child*. The last fragment projected in octaves in the bass concludes with a powerful chord. Rising above its decay is the initial phrase of the first movement.

Songs

Take, O Take Those Lips Away for baritone and piano is set to a poem by William Shakespeare. The vocal part was originally used with the same text in an earlier choral setting that is included with two other works in George Walker's, *Three Lyrics for Chorus*. There are harmonic similarities in the treatment of the two settings of the Shakespeare poem. But, the song setting is not an arrangement of the choral work.

The original version of *Lament* is included in an anthology of art songs by black composers. This revised version reflects changes that have been made primarily in the middle section. The metrical rhythm of the setting consistently alternates between 5-4 and 4--4. The poem was written by Countee Cullen, honored in his lifetime as the most important poet in the Harlem Renaissance. There is a branch of the New York City Public Library that bears his name.

And Wilt Thou Leave Me Thus utilizes a text by Sir Thomas Wyatt. With each recurrence of the first words of the poem, the piano provides a different accompaniment to them. Near the end of the song, the piano reiterates the first notes of the vocal part (*And Wilt Thou Leave Me Thus*) in fortissimo. An antiphonal effect between the voice and the piano follows, emphatically asserting, "Say Nay." The song concludes with a brief arpeggiated flourish.

Song Without Words consists of the vocal and piano accompaniment of a published song entitled, *Leaving*. Both the music and the text to the song were composed by George Walker. The harmonic idiom and the gently swaying rhythm of the music conjure up the sultry atmosphere of a jazz club.

The Composer

George Walker

George Theophilus Walker (born June 27, 1922) the West-Indian-American composer, received the Pulitzer Prize in Music in 1996 for *Lilacs* for Voice and Orchestra. Walker began piano lessons when he was five years old. He was admitted to Oberlin College when he was 14. He continued his studies at the Curtis Institute of Music from which he obtained an Artist Diploma in Piano and Composition. In 1956 he received the Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the Eastman School of Music. He has received Fulbright, Guggenheim and Rockefeller Fellowships, grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Smith College, Rutgers University and the New Jersey Council for the Arts. His compositions have been performed by all of the major American orchestras.

His early teaching career included Dillard University, the Dalcroze School of Music, the New School for Social Research, Smith College, and the University of Colorado-Boulder. Subsequently he taught at the Peabody Conservatory of Music, the University of Delaware, and in 1969 joined the faculty of Rutgers University-Newark, where he was departmental chair and designated Distinguished Professor in 1976.

Walker's first major orchestral work was the *Address for Orchestra*. His *Lyric for Strings* is his most performed orchestral work. He has composed many works including five sonatas for piano, a mass, cantata, many songs, choral works, organ pieces, sonatas for cello and piano, violin and piano and viola and piano, a brass quintet and a woodwind quintet. He has published more than 90 works. He has received commissions from the New York Philharmonic, Boston Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra and many other ensembles. He is the recipient of six honorary doctoral degrees and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 2000 he was inducted into the American Classical Music Hall of Fame.

The Performers

James Martin

James Martin, baritone, is a graduate of The Juilliard School of Music. He has performed a wide range of composers in operas, oratorios and concert music. He resides in Jackson, Mississippi where he teaches at Milsap College and Jackson State University.

Frederick Moyer

Frederick Moyer, pianist, has enjoyed a career of 25 years that has taken him to forty one countries. He has performed in major concert halls in this country. His extensive recordings reflect his catholic taste in composers ranging from the relatively obscure to the acknowledged masters of standard piano repertoire. His interest in contemporary music has resulted in performances of a considerable number of new works for the piano.

Son Sonora String Quartet

The Son Sonora String Quartet consists of Airi Yoshioka and Ashley Horne, violins, Liu-Wien Ting, viola and Arash Amini, cello. Each of these artists has degrees from important music schools in this country and each is actively engaged in solo and chamber music performances throughout the United States. The Son Sonora String Quartet has performed the two string quartets of George Walker in concerts in Atlanta, New York and New Jersey.

George Walker

George Walker is regarded as one of the outstanding pianists of his generation. His recordings on Albany Records and CRI of piano music from the standard repertoire and his own works have received the highest accolades.