

William Grant Still's ...*And They Lynched Him on a Tree*: A Performance and Reception History

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Abstract



William Grant Still's lynching drama ...*And They Lynched Him on a Tree*, which premiered in 1940, has spent many years as a neglected work with fewer than thirty documented performances between 1940 and 2015. With the momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement and the focus on addressing systemic racism, Still's work has increasing relevance in our society. In light of recent scholarship on the work, the number of performances has nearly doubled in six years. A detailed study of the performance record, performance practice and reception history equips the choral/orchestral director with tools to mount a compelling performance built on the successes and learning experiences of previous performers of the work.

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For much of its existence, William Grant Still's ...*And They Lynched Him on a Tree* has been underperformed and underappreciated. However, with growing scrutiny of systemic racism in the American justice system, the momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement, and heightened awareness of and scholarship on the piece, performances of it have markedly increased. This article offers a glimpse into the performance and reception history of the piece and gives choral directors accounts of performance preparations undertaken by previous conductors of the work, with the hope that it will aid anyone contemplating a future production of the piece.

The Composer

Born in Woodville, Mississippi in 1895, William Grant Still was no stranger to the pains of racism in America. The Civil War having ended just thirty

years before his birth, lynchings were common.¹ Still composed with the intent of bringing light to the social issues and injustices of early twentieth-century America. He sought to use American and African American folk material in his "serious" music. By the time Still was approached in 1938 to compose a work on the topic of lynching, his catalog of works had already established his reputation as a nationalistic composer focused on the plight of the African American: *Three Negro Songs* (1922), *Darker America* (1924), *Afro American Symphony* (1930), and *Ebony Chronicle* (1933).

¹ Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909–1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 6.

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The Poet

Katherine Garrison Chapin, who was married to Francis Biddle, the Solicitor General of the United States, wrote the text of *...And They Lynched Him on a Tree*. Chapin, through influential friends Alain Locke and Charlotte “Godmother” Mason, approached Still in 1939 with the prospect of setting her poem to music.² Alain Locke, considered to be the Father of the Harlem Renaissance, was a well-known philosopher and professor at Howard University. Charlotte Mason was an important benefactor of several Harlem Renaissance artists, including Zora Neal Hurston and Langston Hughes. Still and Chapin corresponded through telephone and mail, after which Still agreed to set the text to music.

Musical Forces and Premiere Performance

...And They Lynched Him on a Tree is written for narrator, soloist, “White” choir, “Negro” choir, and orchestra. The white choir portrays the townspeople who lynched the Black man, and the Black choir represents the family and friends of the victim. There is also a narrator whose race is not specified, and a Black contralto soloist who portrays the victim’s mother. The narrator acts as an impartial commentator for the events following the lynching. After a statement from the white choir followed by one from the Black choir, both in character, the two choirs merge and sing united, functioning as a Greek chorus, commenting on what has taken place.

The 1940 premiere is well documented in Wayne Shirley’s 1994 article, “William Grant Still’s Choral Ballad *And They Lynched Him on a Tree*.”³ Receiving overwhelmingly positive reviews in the major

² Wayne D. Shirley, “William Grant Still’s Choral Ballad *And They Lynched Him on a Tree*,” *American Music* 12 (Winter 1994): 425.

³ *Ibid.*, 425–461.

press the piece received several subsequent regional premieres, including one in Mexico, during the 1940s.⁴

The performance reviews are few; however, those that exist are essential to a documentation of the public reception of the work across varying regions of the United States and in different periods of time. For example, reviews exist from 1967 in Los Angeles, 1995 in Greensboro, North Carolina, 1999 in Boston, Massachusetts, 2000 in Raleigh, North Carolina, and 2011 in Boulder, Colorado, as well as a 1996 recording by Philip Brunelle. Although there is a large gap between 1967 and 1995, the reviews span forty-six years and are representative of the West Coast, East Coast, North Eastern and West North Central States.

It should be noted that while the quality of performance is crucial to a positive reception of a work, the assessment of quality is easily swayed by critics’ opinions, biases, and emotions. Thus, the focus here will be on the portions of the review that evaluate the piece itself.

The majority of the reviews are positive assessments of both the work and Still’s talent as a composer. The first performance review of the period spanning 1950 through 2015 is of the Los Angeles Jubilee Singers’ 1967 performance. Donald Vail Allen, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, remarked that “William Grant Still’s ‘O Sorrow!’ (an excerpt from the composer’s *...And They Lynched Him on a Tree*) and *Psalms for the Living* are pleasant pieces. Mr. Still, who was in the audience, is not the most daring of contemporary composers.”⁵ Although this

⁴ An exhaustive list of documented performances, including those discussed by Wayne Shirley, accompanies this article. This discussion focuses on the performances from 1952 through 2020.

⁵ Donald Vail Allen, “Jubilee Singers Perform,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 27, 1967.

critique indicates that only an excerpt of ...*And They Lynched Him on a Tree* was performed, it offers insight into the perception of Still as a composer.

While the focus of this article is on the full performances of the work it is worth noting that the mother's lament, referenced above as "O Sorrow," has occasionally been excerpted for performance, notably on three occasions. The first documented occurrence is a recital performance on March 11, 1956 at the Pasadena Playhouse, Pasadena, CA. This recital featured Georgia Laster, soprano, and Still's wife, Verna Arvey Still, pianist. Included on the concert program was the contralto solo "O Sorrow," listed on the program under "operatic arias." William Grant Still was in attendance and also spoke on the program in a speech entitled "Sharing the Nation's Cultural Life."⁶ The second performance is documented above and the third solo vocal performance occurred on April 18, 1995 with Beth E. Strittmatter performing, accompanied by pianist Adam Tyler.⁷

The 1995 performances of the work by the Greensboro Symphony received two separate reviews, both of which were positive. Henry Black Ingram of the *Greensboro News and Record* remarked, "[t]he text focuses on the racial injustices in our nation during the early decades of this century, and the work makes a rather powerful and effective statement with its dramatic juxtaposition of musical and textural elements."⁸ Tim Lindeman of *Triad Style* called the piece "powerful and provocative...a solidly

conceived and dramatic work."⁹ Likewise, the 1999 performance in Boston received a positive review which appeared in *The Boston Globe*. Susan Larson reported:

...It is called 'And They Lynched Him on a Tree,' and it turns an unflinching gaze on race-hatred and violence. Here is an American Stabat Mater touching on such terrible shame and sorrow that the participants, both Coro Allegro and their guests, the New Haven Heritage Chorale, John Q. Berryman, director, must have lived through some shattering times together just trying to perform it.¹⁰

Although Donald Vail Allen criticized Still for his lack of daring as a composer, the available performance reviews reflect positively on the piece. This fact has assisted in promoting the work, particularly in major metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles and Boston.

Perhaps more important are the reviews of the two commercial recordings of the work which serve as permanent records of past performance. The oldest recording of the piece, available for purchase through William Grant Still Music, dates from 1942, conducted by Leopold Stokowski.¹¹ The second recording is the 1996 VocalEssence performance, conducted by Philip Brunelle.

The VocalEssence recording is partially responsible for the increase in performance activity that occurred between 1999 and 2016. Thirteen performances of ...*And They Lynched Him on a Tree*,

⁶ Concert program of the Pasadena Playhouse, March 11, 1956, MC 1125, Box 8, *William Grant Still and Verna Arvey Papers*, University of Arkansas Library, Fayetteville, AR.

⁷ Concert program of Northern Arizona University, April 18, 1995, MC 1125, Volume 94, Part 1, *William Grant Still and Verna Arvey Papers*, University of Arkansas Library, Fayetteville, AR.

⁸ Henry Black Ingram, "Concert Piece Focuses on Early Racial Injustices/*And They Lynched Him on a Tree*," *Greensboro News and Record*, January 14, 1995.

⁹ Tim Lindeman, "Two Great Performances This Week," *Triad Style*, January 17, 1995.

¹⁰ Susan Larson, "Coro Allegro concert tugs at heart, conscience," *Boston Globe*, February 23, 1999.

¹¹ This recording, until recently, was only available as a complimentary supplement to a purchase of vocal scores or conductor parts. It is now available for purchase through William Grant Still music.

spanning the fifty-six years from its 1940 premiere to its 1996 commercial recording, have been documented. However, in the twenty-five years following the 1996 recording, there have been thirty documented performances: a significant increase over time. Of the compact disc, Wilfred Mellers, seemingly unimpressed with the piece, states that,

The biggest piece on this CD is in fact called *And they lynched him on a tree...* The verses, if not distinguished, carry a high emotive charge in recounting events that ought to be still blush-making to whites. Musically, Still handles double choir and orchestra with some expertise, though the intrusion of the speaking voice seems, as usual, otiose. The musical idiom is somewhere between 'American' Dvořák and White-Negro Gershwin; though the music hasn't potent individuality, it holds the attention as well as much, though not all, American music composed around 1940.¹²

Mellers compares Still's talent to that of his European counterparts and finds Still "holding on to an academically nineteenth century idiom into the mid 20th century."¹³ In spite of his generally lukewarm review, the comparison of the piece to others from the late 1930s and early 1940s lends credibility to the work.

Positioning the piece more positively is a review by Eric Salzman in *Stereo Review*. Although Salzman gives the CD an overall rating of "okay,"¹⁴ he praises Still's work as a composer.

¹² Wilfred Mellers, "New World Oldies," *Musical Times*, 137, no. 1838 (April 1996): 20.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Eric Salzman, "Still: *And They Lynched Him on a Tree*; *Wailing Woman/ Miss Sally's Party*; other works," *Stereo Review*, Vol. 61, no. 8 (August 1996): 97.

And They Lynched Him on a Tree, a cantata or oratorio for double chorus, mezzo-soprano, narrator, and orchestra, is as powerful a piece of work as you will find in American classical music. The strength is partly in the peculiarly American subject, but it is also in the music, which is a strong, dark, and dramatic expression of the horrific scene conjured up by the words. Still's use of traditional material, once thought to be dated, now seems fresh and relevant again, and the power of the material is as biblical as that of any Bach Passion.¹⁵

Michael Fleming reviews the piece in a similar fashion but is less complimentary of the choral element, describing it as "underpowered and unfocused."¹⁶

The Brunelle recording of *...And They Lynched Him on a Tree* is the second of four discs in a series entitled *WITNESS*. Brian Burns reviewed the entire series in the May 2007 issue of the *Choral Journal*. He states, "although compelling and hauntingly beautiful in many places, this is a difficult piece to listen to. Here is art that confronts the listener and forces him or her to acknowledge and consider the tragedies of our recent past."¹⁷ Ten years prior, in the same publication, Weyburn Wasson described the piece: "[A] powerful dramatic cantata...[a] chilling work, when taken in its historical context of a still militantly segregated nation in 1941, is a bold and foreboding work. Musically it is one of Still's greatest but, alas, not well-known works."¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Michael Fleming, "Plymouth Music Series: Philip Brunelle, conductor, 'Witness Vol. II: William Grant Still,' (Collins Classics)," *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, March 31, 1996, accessed September 15, 2015.

¹⁷ Brian Burns, "The WITNESS Collection," *Choral Journal* 47 [May 2007]: 75.

¹⁸ Weyburn Wasson, "Witness, Volume II," *Choral Journal* 37 [April 1997]: 60.

A more recent video recording of *...And They Lynched Him on a Tree* by the Urban Playground Chamber Orchestra is available on their YouTube channel. The video documents a performance which includes the Brooklyn Ecumenical Choir and an ad hoc chorus performing as the Lynch Mob. Although this performance is not reviewed, it merits mention because it provides an example of performance practice decisions for the work.¹⁹

Conductor Interviews

There are no documented performances of *...And They Lynched Him on a Tree* between 1944 and 1952. The 1952, 1967 and 1974 performances occurred in California. This is logical when considering that, from 1934 until his death, Still lived in California.²⁰ Albert McNeil, a native Californian, conducted each of the California performances. Between the performances of 1952 and 1967 was a 1957 performance in New York by the Westminster Interracial Fellowship Chorus, owing most likely to the premiere performances of the 1940s in New York.

It is interesting to note that although William Grant Still died in 1978, an event which for other composers has led to memorial performances of their work, there are no documented performances of *...And They Lynched Him on a Tree* between 1974 and 1993. Between 1993 and 2015, the decision to perform the piece has been informed by two factors: Judith Anne Still, the composer's daughter and tireless champion of his music, and knowledge of previous performances.

¹⁹ Urban Playground Chamber Orchestra. "From Song Came Symphony: William Grant Still's *And They Lynched Him on a Tree*," Dec. 29, 2019, video, 18:08. <https://youtu.be/3ccUZxIWIr4>.

²⁰ Verna Arvey, *In One Lifetime*, (Fayetteville, The University of Arkansas Press, 1984), 115–117.

However, in 2016 doctoral dissertations were written on the piece by Harlan Zackery, Jr.²¹ and Brandon Williams.²²

Many of the conductors were introduced to the piece through conversations with Judith Anne Still or promotional mailings from William Grant Still Music Company. Most of the conductors interviewed commented on Judith Anne Still's zeal for her father's music and willingness to educate the public about his compositional output. Her work has been the source of inspiration for the 1994, 1995, 2001 performances, a cancelled performance of the piece in 2007, and the undated performance in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Conversely, Alan Harler, conductor emeritus of The Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia, and his performance of the work with the same group, inspired performances at Westminster Choir College (which subsequently led to a performance in Raleigh, North Carolina), Hilton Head Island, South Carolina and Boston, Massachusetts. The 2009 performance in Hattiesburg was inspired in part by knowledge of the planned 2007 performance by the Mississippi Symphony. An undated performance in Ann Arbor gave inspiration for the 2011 performances in Boulder, Colorado.

Through the process of documenting each performance, a progression appears with such prevalence that it can reasonably be expected to present itself in subsequent productions. Initially there is resistance to the idea of performing the piece, primarily fueled by stigmas associated with the title of the work, the request for a white

²¹ The Zackery dissertation explores the performance and reception history of *...And They Lynched Him on a Tree* through an examination of academic texts, published reviews and conductor/chorus master interviews, leading to recommendations to tackle the work's inherent performance practice concerns.

²² Dr. Williams' document and subsequent *Choral Journal* article present compelling performance and programming recommendations, and explore the work's origin and initial reception and classification.

choir and a Black choir, internal struggle with the subject matter, and/or fears of a backlash from the public including the possibility of creating racial tension. Following this initial stage comes a deeper examination of the text and an acceptance, in most cases, of the subject matter. For example, in the 2009 Mississippi Symphony Orchestra performance, the conductor and President of the Orchestra had high hopes for a planned performance but were met with resistance. Crafton Beck, conductor of the Mississippi Symphony recounts:

All I know is that we proposed it.... A number of weeks...passed by, and when it came back, it was a very strong response. It was not just from the music departments; mainly...it was as much from the administration of the school[s] as it was from the music departments. It wasn't at all that this isn't a topic that should be talked about...It was simpler than that. It was just "we don't want to go there right now."²³

The "there" of which Beck speaks is the subject of race, a theme which saturates the discussion of the performance, which was eventually cancelled. Judith Anne Still, who consulted with the coordinators, stated:

That's because, I think it was the head of the department, or the head of something, he was a racist, and he claimed to me on the phone, in a bombastic voice, that, "the Black people didn't want them to do it. They didn't want to bring it up." I said, "hmmm, I know that's wrong." So they cancelled the performance. You know, Mississippi is going to be the last bastion of hatred for a long time...He didn't want to do it for

racial reasons and he wanted to make it appear that the Black people had killed the performance.²⁴

Mrs. Still could not recall the name of the man of whom she speaks, or his capacity in the project.

It is possible that, as messages were relayed from person to person, that factors of race began to play a perceived role which was larger or different than reality. Richard Waters, then Director of Choral Activities at Delta State University, remembers a milder, though no less serious, discussion which centered on his students, mainly those of color:

As I recall, it wasn't so much an objection from the Bologna Center as it was from students and the music department chair, David Schubert. The semester before the program (spring 2007 I believe), I described the piece and read the text of the first movement to my choral conducting class. One of my students (an African American) said, "Dr. Waters, my momma would kill me if I sing that! I respect you and all, but I'll take the F." Other students expressed similar sentiments. After discussing it further with the music chair, we asked the [Mississippi Symphony Orchestra] if another piece would be considered instead. I had mixed feelings about it, but ultimately felt that my students' voices deserved to be heard and respected.²⁵

Don Trott, choral director at The University of Mississippi, spoke on behalf of his institution. While the decision to choose another piece was shared with Delta State University, the reasons were different:

²³ Crafton Beck, interview with author, Jackson MS, August 1, 2015.

²⁴ Judith Anne Still, interview with author, telephone, September 8, 2015.

²⁵ Richard Waters, email message to author, August 3, 2015.

...I do remember that it simply was the title that caused the administration to not desire to program this work in the Ford Center for the Performing Arts at the University of Mississippi. In prior years, the university had celebrated the fortieth anniversary of James Meredith's entrance into the university. Diversity was and is an important focus of the university. It was deemed better to not take a chance on such a title creating an issue with the forward momentum of the continued efforts toward civility and diversity.²⁶

The feelings were not unanimous from one university to the next. At the opposite end of the state is William Carey University. Carey choral director Mark Malone was the Mississippi Arts Commission liaison for this project and was instrumental in selecting repertoire for the series of concerts. Malone recounts that,

The opportunity to present a work by Mississippi native son, William Grant Still, was quite wonderful given a [National Endowment of the Arts] grant to share the choral works of this renowned composer born in the Magnolia State. Shockingly, administrations of both The University of Mississippi and Delta State University were reticent to perform the controversial work, *And They Lynched Him on a Tree* and forced a decision to be made that eliminated the piece from the concert program... [William Carey University] students were much in favor of performing the piece, which continued the position of past administrators who led WCU to be the first private institution in MS to admit African American students.²⁷

Two years later at the University of Southern Mississippi the same worries were present. As the Southern Chorale was preparing for a performance of the piece there was tremendous concern about the support of the singers. The Director of Choral Activities shared those concerns, and exercised caution by securing the approval of both the Dean of the College and the Chair of the School of Music. Fortunately, no serious issues arose.

Considering the racial history of the southern United States it is easy to assume that this initial resistance is unique to the South. However, conductors from other locales also experienced difficulty in convincing their respective organizations to perform the piece. Alan Harler, then conductor of the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia, remembers initial resistance from the ensemble's board of directors. "They were so alarmed by the title that they wondered whether or not we should do it. But then when they understood the overall meaning of ...the fact that there was an African American chorus or a Black chorus and a [W]hite chorus and that they played a part of what was really a drama, a scene, a terrible scene...",²⁸ they agreed to allow the performance. Lawrence Speakman of the Concert Singers of Cary, North Carolina recounts vivid memories of his encounter with the board of directors:

When I brought this up, they looked at me like I'd lost my mind. And the executive director said to me, "How am I supposed to market this? How do we publicize attendance for this program?" ...So I explained my motivations and said... "Well, if you feel this is too hot to handle, I understand that. If you think it's too risky I understand that. But I want you to know that if you decided that we shouldn't do this program, I'm

²⁶ Don Trott, electronic survey response to author, August 1, 2015.

²⁷ Mark Malone, electronic survey response to author, July 31, 2015.

²⁸ Alan Harler, interview with author, telephone, August 29, 2015.

going to do this program on my own. I would produce it myself apart from the chorus.”²⁹

Speakman was able to convince the board of directors to allow the performance, which was received positively.

The performance preparations for this piece often involve a process of catharsis for those involved and, in many instances, a healing process or starting point for conversation on the topic of race. The New Haven, Connecticut performance of 1999 is most indicative of the latter. The initial preparations for the performance received coverage on National Public Radio’s Morning Edition.³⁰ Elizabeth Blair interviewed members of both the Black choir and the white choir. Members of both ensembles expressed the difficulty they experienced in dealing with the emotional weight of the texts and the portrayals of the Black and white communities. The broadcast also excerpts portions of the ensembles’ rehearsals. Of particular importance in the radio broadcast is the discussion of the privilege of Yale University in contrast to the poor economic conditions of the larger New Haven Community. Jonathan Berryman, Director of The Heritage Chorale of New Haven, an African American choir, spoke to the relationship between Yale and the community. “This is first time in the five years that I have been here that there will have been any significant African American presence on the concert stage in Woolsey Hall performing any type of music. It just has not been done in this community.”³¹ Meanwhile, New Haven Chorale member Charlotte Holloman states, “It’s face to face in an age where we have very little contact with each other. We tend to not

see each other. We don’t have the opportunity to talk to each other. So this brings us together in a musical venue which makes it perhaps easier to talk about this.”³² For the performance, Paul Mueller recounts that the hall was full, with more African American audience members than white. He believes that for many of the African Americans in attendance it was their first time in that venue. Both local and state politicians were in attendance. Mueller also received many letters and emails from audience members who were moved by the performance, including a letter from a relative of Katherine Garrison Chapin who attended the performance. Many of the choristers continue to speak fondly of the performance to Mueller, sixteen years later.³³

Jonathan Berryman recalls, “...I have never yet seen Woolsey Hall that full for a musical performance. When I say never, I mean never. There are two balconies. The first balcony goes all the way around. And then, the second balcony is just in the back of the hall. Full! All the way around. Full!”³⁴ Berryman’s ensemble, which continues to exist, was formed because of the need for a Black choir for the New Haven performance of the piece.

Donald Dumpson, who conducted the work with the Westminster Jubilee Singers and has prepared the Celestial Choir of Bright Hope Baptist Church for performance with the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia, recounted a rehearsal process at Westminster in which the white choir and Black choir were not allowed to interact. This choice was made to create a sense of segregation and intensity similar to those present during the work’s creation. Of that process he stated,

²⁹ Lawrence Speakman, interview with author, telephone, August 4, 2015.

³⁰ *Morning Edition*, “Play Evokes Strong Emotions,” featuring Elizabeth Blair, aired January 29, 1999, on National Public Radio, recorded broadcast in private collection.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Paul Mueller, interview with author, telephone, August 6, 2015.

³⁴ Jonathan Berryman, interview with author, telephone, August 16, 2015.

“[it] was very emotional... I really, if you think about phenomenology, wanted it to be a real lived experience for them. So, we really, really created a sense of segregation and really worked pretty intense[ly] about allowing those feelings to be real. They would journal about it.”³⁵

Lawrence Speakman, who consulted Dumpson prior to his own performance of the piece with the Concert Singers of Cary, also created a physical separation of the choirs (rehearsing in separate locations) during rehearsals. Speakman’s approach to the piece encouraged dialogue about race and injustice in the rehearsal process.³⁶

Coro Allegro, directed by David Hodgkins, experienced trouble in initial preparations for their performance of *...And They Lynched Him on a Tree*. The ensemble originally contacted a Boston-area church choir to sing the role of the Black community in the performance. As David Hodgkins discussed,

“about a month or two before the performance, [the church choir] discovered that Coro Allegro was a gay chorus and they decided to back out; which is kind of weird because the piece is about oppression and racism and overcoming our differences to unite. So there was a whole other layer to this. So, we were without a chorus.”³⁷

Meg Oakes, Coro Allegro singer and Past President of the organization, gave further details:

As it was explained to us, some members of that church choir were not comfortable singing about such a painful, difficult, and sometimes personal subject as the lynching of blacks, did not have enough time to prepare the music, and were not willing to perform in collaboration with lesbians and gay men. Our reactions to this news were as varied as we are, but many of us felt rejected, angry, or worried. We spent part of a late January rehearsal discussing how we felt. We spoke about the guilt, sadness, and anger we feel when we sing the part of the white chorus; about our unrealistic and unfair expectations of the original black chorus; and about our desire to educate ourselves and our audience, coupled with our obligation to not hurt our collaborators, our audience, or our members. We also spoke about the excitement and pride we feel as we present such important and moving music by an underperformed composer... As lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and supporters, and as a predominantly white group, we hope, through this performance, to reach out into the black community to form connections, and together create art that, in itself, seeks to challenge racist assumptions by forging a connection between disparate communities....The program is powerful. It has changed many of our lives, reminding us of the reality of racism and of homophobia, challenging us to open up to one another, enabling us to see other gaps we would like to bridge, and especially, reiterating the importance of breaking silence.³⁸

³⁵ Donald Dumpson, interview with author, telephone, August 7, 2015.

³⁶ Speakman.

³⁷ David Hodgkins, interview with author, telephone, August 23, 2015.

³⁸ Concert program of Coro Allegro, February 21, 1999, MC 1125, Volume 98, *William Grant Still and Verna Arvey Papers*, University of Arkansas Library, Fayetteville, AR.

Outcomes

A reward of the rehearsal process has been the overwhelming success that ...*And They Lynched Him on a Tree* has experienced with audiences in every documented performance. A violinist with the Albany Symphony Orchestra who also performed the piece recounts that, “the performance...was very well received by the audience. It is, of course, a profoundly moving and disturbing piece and I think the audience was deeply affected by it.”³⁹

Paul Anthony McRae of the Greensboro Symphony Orchestra recalls that the audience “responded really well. I have to tell you that it was very well received.”⁴⁰

Of the audience reaction at the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia performance, Alan Harler remembers, “... the audience was stunned, you know. It’s so vivid and Marietta [Simpson]’s aria was so incredibly beautiful that I think the audience was holding their breath by the end of the piece. And so I think it was a very favorable response, not that the people were left feeling great about it, but I think they had been moved and changed by both the text and the music.”⁴¹

Of the Concert Singers of Cary performance, Lawrence Speakman recalls:

[they] found it to be a wonderful experience for us, one of the most artistically meaningful things. I mean, to this day, people just talked about that; ‘Wow, we did that! What a wonderful work that was, and what a revealing work

that was!’ The postscript to this, and I found this interesting as well, is because it was so well received, we got a request... to perform it again locally.⁴²

Although The Concert Singers of Cary were invited to perform the piece a second time, the members were reticent to do so, fearful that subsequent performances would diminish the value of the initial shared experience. In fact, Speakman recounts that the experience was “transformative... . And since [they] did do this with people who knew each other, the relationships deepened after that, and it was really, really wonderful to see.”⁴³

On March 21, 2001, Scott Youngs, Director of Music at All Saints’ Episcopal Church in Phoenix, Arizona conducted the work. Youngs recounts that the performance was well received and the “singers loved the work, and putting it together with an entirely different tradition made it even more interesting.”⁴⁴

Fred Peterbark, formerly of the University of Colorado Boulder, conducted a performance on February 12, 2011, a collaboration with dance professor Onye Ozuzu, that differed greatly from other documented performances.

...[I]t was presented almost as if it was a ballet where you have your musicians typically in the pit and then you have the staged ballet above it. This was all on one floor in a black box theatre. So, the musicians and myself, we were in simply a corner of the room and you had the stage area...where the dancing

³⁹ Ann-Marie Barker Schwartz, email message to author, August 6, 2015.

⁴⁰ Paul Anthony McRae, interview with author, telephone, August 15, 2015.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Speakman.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Scott Youngs, electronic survey response to author, August 9, 2015.

was taking place... And it was just very, very special and unique because...the entire time that I was conducting I was not looking at the dancers. I was only looking at my musicians.

...There was one [performance installation] that I specifically remember of a woman and I think it was a story of someone giving birth but the baby was, essentially, already being lynched. And she had this red rope that went up her dress from the bottom and came out from up the opening above her breast and the rope just continued to come out. She had to deal with this rope—this red rope that—as it was being used for lynching purposes...

And that was one of the most significant things that I remember prior to the performance of *...And They Lynched Him*. The fascinating impact of what Onye decided to create within *...And They Lynched Him* was a conclusion, shall we say, to these because the piece doesn't end with a period. It ends with a deceptive or half cadence. It's unfinished almost. And at the end of that there was this African drumming that happened. And there were two gentlemen that were suspended the entire time in this hanging silk as if they were in a cocoon. And there was this woman that would come out almost as if she was—her face was painted white and it was almost as if she was a witch doctor—but I think she was supposed to represent the mother. And she actually released these two individuals from their cocoons—from their places of captivity.⁴⁵

While *...And They Lynched Him on a Tree* has a record of positive experiences in performance, performance frequency has been limited. In

⁴⁵ Fred Peterbark, interview with author, telephone, August 19, 2015.

eighty years the piece has had fifty documented performances, the equivalent of one performance every 1.6 years. Most performances have occurred in the northern states of New York, Vermont, Massachusetts, and New Jersey, with the majority of those performances occurring in New York. Over the past few years there have been increasing numbers of assumed premiere performances in the southern states such as Arkansas, Mississippi, Georgia, Florida and Alabama, the states experiencing more racially motivated violence since the Reconstruction Era. However, with the publication of two dissertations and a recent *Choral Journal* article⁴⁶ dedicated to the work, the frequency of new performances has increased dramatically over the past five years. From 2018 to 2020, there have been fifteen documented performances.

Conclusion

...And They Lynched Him on a Tree deserves a place in the canon of choral literature. From our vantage point early in a new millennium we can reflect and learn from the atrocities of the nation's not-too-distant past, and face the realities of current social and racial unrest. We find ourselves grasping the ramifications of systemic inequities and forms of "lynching" on different types of "roadside trees," as the Black Lives Matter Movement and pleas for meaningful change grow louder and stronger. As choral professionals searching to give voice to this movement, William Grant Still and Katherine Garrison Chapin long ago provided us a vehicle to speak to and effect change in our own communities. It is my hope that this article will provide the reader with a measure of confidence and informed decision-making when considering a possible performance of *...And They Lynched Him on a Tree*.

⁴⁶ Brandon Williams, "The Shadow Still Lingers: A Conductor's Guide for William Grant Still's *...And They Lynched Him on a Tree*," *Choral Journal* 58 No. 8 (March 2018): 6–19.

Documented Performances

June 25, 1940, New York, NY

Artur Rodzinski, Conductor
Abner Dorsey, Narrator
Louise Burge, Contralto
Schola Cantorum/Wen Talbot Negro Choir
New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra

**December 1940, Howard University,
Washington, DC.**

Exact date and performance details not known

June 23, 1941, New York, NY

Hugh Ross, Conductor
Abner Dorsey and George Headley, Narrators
Louise Burge, Contralto
Schola Cantorum/Eva Jessye Choir
New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra

April 14, 1942, New York, NY

Leopold Stokowski, Conductor
Lawrence Whisonant, Narrator
Louise Burge, contralto
Collegiate Choir/Eva Jessye Choir
NBC Symphony Orchestra

1944, Mexico City, Mexico

Carlos Chavez, Conductor
Exact date and performance details not known

1952, Los Angeles, CA

Albert McNeil, Conductor
Exact date and performance details not known

February 23, 1957, New York, NY

David Katz, Conducto
David Allen, Narrator
Carol Brice, Contralto
Westminster Interracial Fellowship Chorus
Jonathan Brice, Piano

March 25, 1967, Beverly Hills, CA

Albert J. McNeil, Conductor
Other performance details not known

April 28, 1974, Los Angeles, CA

Albert J. McNeil, Conductor
Elmer Bush, Narrator
Virginia White, Contralto
East Los Angeles College Concert Choir/
Los Angeles Jubilee Singers
Pianist not known

February 12/13, 1993, Albany, NY

David Alan Miller, Conductor
Robert C. Lamar, Narrator
Marietta Simpson, Contralto
Albany Pro Musica
Albany Symphony Orchestra

February 5/6, 1994, Princeton, NJ

Frances Slade, Conductor
Princeton Pro Musica
Other performance details not known

January 14/16, 1995, Greensboro, NC

Paul Anthony McRae, Conductor
Howard Allen Chubbs, Narrator
Elvira Green, Contralto
The Bel Canto Company/Bennett College
Choir and The North Carolina A & T State
University Choir
Greensboro Symphony Orchestra

May 6, 1995, Philadelphia, PA

Alan Harler, Conductor
Charles Walker, Narrator
Marietta Simpson, Contralto
Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia/Bright Hope
Baptist Church Celestial Choir
Concerto Soloists of Philadelphia and John
French, Organ

January 23, 1996, Collins Classics

Philip Brunelle, Conductor
William Warfield, Narrator
Hilda Harris, Contralto
Plymouth Music Singers/Leigh Morris Chorale
Plymouth Music Players

January 30, 1999, New Haven, CT

Paul Mueller, Conductor
Ben Harney, Narrator
Kishna Davis, Contralto
The New Haven Chorale/The Heritage Chorale
For-Hire Orchestra

February 21, 1999, Boston, MA

David Hodgkins, Conductor
Paul Parks, Jr., Narrator
Marietta Simpson, Contralto
Coro Allegro/The Heritage Chorale
Darryl Hollister, Piano

May 21, 2000, Raleigh, NC

Lawrence J. Speakman, Conductor
William Henry Curry, Narrator
Sharyn Stith, Contralto
Concert Singers of Cary/Additional Singers
from the Community
Jodi Adams, Piano

January 15, 2001, Hilton Head Island, SC

Mary Woodmansee Green, Conductor
William Warfield, Narrator
Marietta Simpson, Contralto
Hilton Head Orchestra

March 11, 2001, Cincinnati, OH

Paul Zappa, Conductor
Edwin Rigaud, Narrator
Mary Henderson-Stucky, Contralto
St. Ursula Academy Freshmen Chorus, St.
Xavier High School Men's Chorus and
Ursuline Academy Select Choir
Orchestra not known

March 21, 2001, Phoenix, AZ

Scott Youngs, Conductor
All Saints' Episcopal Church Choir/First
Institutional Baptist Church Choir
Other performance details not known

April 4/5, 2008, Bloomington, IN

Mark Brennan Doerries, Conductor
Other performance details not known

April 14/24, 2009, Hattiesburg, MS

Harlan Zackery, Jr., Conductor
Chris Jennings, Narrator
Ashley N. Henry, Contralto
The Southern Chorale
Mary Chung, Piano

February 11/12, 2011, Boulder, CO

Fred Peterbark, Conductor
Other performance details not known

January 19, 2015, Putney, VT

Cailin Marcel Manson, Conductor
The Putney School Madrigals/Germantown
Concert Chorus Putney Community Orchestra
Other performance details not known

October 10, 2015, East Lansing, MA

Brandon Williams, Conductor
Kevin McBeth, Narrator
Rosetta Sellers-Varela, Contralto
Selected music students of Michigan State
University
For-Hire Orchestra

April 2016, Carlisle, PA

Dickinson College Choir
Exact date and performance details not known

April 20/21, 2018, Atlanta, GA/Marietta, GA
Timothy Verville, Conductor
Georgia Spiritual Ensemble/Georgia Symphony
Orchestra Chorus/Morehouse College Glee
Club/Spelman College Glee Club/Uzee Brown
Society of Choraliers
Georgia Symphony Orchestra
Other performance details not known

**April 21/22, 2018, Rollins College, Winter
Park, FL**
John Sinclair, Conductor
Kevin Deas, Narrator
Krysty Swann, Mezzo Soprano
Bach Festival Society Choir of Winter Park
Bethune-Cookman
University Concert Choral
Bach Festival Society Orchestra of Winter Park

**March 1/3, 2019, St. Ann and the Holy
Trinity Catholic Church, Brooklyn, NY**
Malcolm J. Merriweather, Conductor
Brooklyn College Symphonic Choir and
Conservatory Singers/Grace Chorale of
Brooklyn
The String Orchestra of Brooklyn
Other performance details not known

March 24, 2019, Boston, MA
David Hodgkins, Conductor
Ron Williams, Narrator
Sylvia V. C. Twine, Soloist
Coro Allegro/Heritage Chorale of New Haven
Freelance Orchestra
Other performance details not known

May 8, 2019, New York, NY
Thomas Cunningham, Conductor
Lawrence Craig, Narrator
Lucia Bradford, Contralto
Ad Hoc Chorus/Brooklyn Ecumenical Choir
Urban Playground Chamber Orchestra

**July 4-6, 2019, Atlanta, GA/Montgomery, AL/
Birmingham, AL**
The Congressional Chorus of Washington, DC/
Grace Chorale of Brooklyn
Other performance details not known

**February 22/23, 2020, La Jolla, CA/National
City, CA**
David Chase, Conductor
Michael L. Henderson, Narrator
Judith Malone, Soloist
Bodhi Tree Concerts Chorus/Martin Luther
King, Jr. Community Choir
Accompaniment not known

March 5, 2020, Little Rock, AR
Prairie View A&M University Concert Chorale
University Singers of the University of Missouri
Other performance details not known

March 8, 2020, Duluth, MN
Jean Perrault, Conductor
Ad Hoc Chorus and Orchestra
Other performance details not known

Date Unknown, Grand Rapids, MI
Conductor, not known
East Congregational United Church of
Christ Choir
West Wind Quintet
Other performance details not known

Date unknown, Ann Arbor, MI
Marietta Simpson, Contralto
Other performance details not known

Date unknown, Princeton, NJ
Donald Dumpson, Conductor
Samar Newsome, Narrator
Kimberley King Harley, Contralto
Westminster Jubilee Singers
Pianist, not known

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