



WILLIAM GRANT

STILL

SYMPHONY NO. 2
“SONG OF A
NEW RACE”

SYMPHONY NO. 4
“AUTOCHTHONOUS”

National Symphony Orchestra
Gianandrea Nosedà

National Symphony Orchestra

GIANANDREA NOSEDA, CONDUCTOR

“Getting to know, studying, and conducting the music of William Grant Still has given me the opportunity to deepen my understanding of twentieth-century American symphonic repertoire. The combination of African American musical elements—expressed through harmonic and melodic patterns derived from the Blues—with the European symphonic tradition gives rise to a highly distinctive and compelling musical language. I hope that this remarkable music will be enjoyed and appreciated by a wide audience of curious listeners who are open to unexpected discoveries.”

—Gianandrea Noseda

National Symphony Orchestra
The Kennedy Center



Gianandrea Noseda
Music Director
The Roger Sant and
Congresswoman Doris Matsui Chair





National Symphony Orchestra

GIANANDREA NOSEDA, CONDUCTOR

WILLIAM GRANT STILL

(1895–1978)

Symphony No. 2 in G minor “Song of a New Race”

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------|
| 1. Slowly | 11:11 |
| 2. Slowly and deeply expressive | 9:02 |
| 3. Moderately fast | 4:00 |
| 4. Moderately slow | 8:10 |

Symphony No. 4 “Autochthonous”

- | | |
|--------------------------------|-------|
| 5. Moderately | 6:18 |
| 6. Slowly | 7:06 |
| 7. With a graceful lilt | 3:00 |
| 8. Slowly and reverently | 12:35 |

Total 61:22

Biography

Born May 11, 1895, in Woodville, Mississippi, the only child of two educators, William Grant Still came of age in Little Rock, Arkansas, during the ripening years of the Jim Crow South. Often referred to as the “Dean of Afro-American Composers,” Still made a comparatively late entry to formal musical training. Though his own father had been a semi-professional bandleader before his passing, Still only convinced his hesitant mother to let him study violin as a teenager after fashioning a makeshift instrument out of a cigar box. This tireless commitment to his development—without the same patronage opportunities afforded to his white peers—would shape the arc of his adolescence. As a student at Wilberforce University, he spent his free time studying opera scores, playing in ensembles, and teaching himself several instruments in lieu of a music course. During his time at Oberlin Conservatory, Still worked as a janitor to finance his studies. He also pursued mentorships with prominent composers like George Whitefield Chadwick and Edgard Varèse, though his relationship with W. C. Handy would prove perhaps most formative. The “Father of the Blues” employed the young Still not only for a summer on tour, but also years later, when Still moved to New York City in 1919 to work at Handy’s prominent Pace & Handy label, soon to become the highly influential Black Swan Records.

Still would go on to split his mature compositions into three distinct idioms. The “ultramodern” period spans up until 1925, and reflects his experimental studies with Varèse. Shifting focus from modernist techniques, Still entered his “racial” period, centered on proactively introducing elements of African American musical culture into the concert hall. It was during this period that Still composed his breakthrough piece, the *Afro-American Symphony*.

The two pieces on this recording fall under Still’s “universal” period, during which he looked deliberately beyond the references of Black music to other American and New World traditions. He relocated to Los Angeles in this time, a move scholar Catherine Parsons Smith has called a “self-exile.” There, Still worked to hone his creative as well as his political

position independently. As he explained, “Some people have tried to work through legal or political means, but I have sought to work through friendship and music, expressed in my own way and according to my personal beliefs.” The composer led a quieter life on the West Coast, where his output slowed over the last decades of his life. He died December 3, 1978, in Los Angeles.

Symphony No. 2 in G minor “Song of a New Race”

The six years between the premieres of Still’s First Symphony, the highly acclaimed “Afro-American,” and his Second, the 1937 “Song of a New Race,” condense several decades in the development of African American thought. While the First Symphony represents, in the composer’s words, “the Negro of days not far removed from the Civil War,” the Second alludes to “the American colored man of today, in so many instances a totally new individual produced through the fusion of white, Indian, and Negro bloods” (Still’s own ethnic background.) From a stylistic perspective, the piece marks an early stretch into the composer’s “universal” period. The difficulty of making this stretch, as demonstrated by his problematic communication with collaborators, critics, and audiences alike, reflects the tension inherent to his position as an African American composer—expected to represent his race without being defined by his race, all while contributing to the as yet undefined “American” voice.

By the mid-1930s, Still was racking up the series of firsts that would earn him the title “Dean of Afro-American Composers.” In 1936, he became the first African American to conduct a major American orchestra, leading the Los Angeles Philharmonic in excerpts from the First Symphony as well as his 1930 symphonic poem *Africa*. The same year, music director Leopold Stokowski opted to include the fourth movement of the *Afro-American Symphony* on the Philadelphia Orchestra’s national tour. For decades to come, the piece would be among the most often performed works by any American composer. It was a sensation.

Yet, Still had higher ambitions. As his writings read, “My Opinion: This [First] Symphony approaches but does not attain to the profound symphonic work I hope to write; a work presenting a great truth that will be of value to mankind in general.” With Stokowski’s support, Still began work on the Second Symphony, a piece with broader concerns than those of his self-described “racial” period. While he remained committed to his “definite goal” (“to elevate Negro musical idioms to a position of dignity and effectiveness in the fields of symphonic and operatic music”), Still’s move to Los Angeles and his growing relationship with a white Jewish woman had brought exposure to new musical heritages. He acknowledged the divergent historical concerns of the First and Second Symphonies, but gone were the explanatory subtitles and poetic interjections of before. Said Still, “I prefer to think of it as an abstract piece of music.” That is, though the piece speaks directly to the African American experience in the early 20th century, this was by no means its singular focus.

So, what of the Symphony’s title—“Song of a New Race”? The choice came not from Still but from Stokowski himself, who wrote to the composer shortly before the piece’s premiere. He requested a title that would “express the idea of *Afro-American Symphony*, but with some other words,” suggesting that Still “may think of some word of African origin which is colorful.” (He apologized for the “hasty” ask). With no apparent reply, another letter followed from Stokowski: “Am calling your symphony ‘Song of a New Race.’”

Still himself provided comparatively brief—though characteristically enigmatic—program notes for the premiere’s playbill: “It may be said that the purpose of the Symphony [No. 2] in G Minor is to point musically to changes wrought in a people through the progressive and transmuting spirit of America.” He had a more nationalistic scope in mind.

Partly panned at its opening, the Second Symphony received hugely contrasting reviews—considered by some “unmistakably racial” and, by others, a missed opportunity to include any “hardly suggested” Black musical idioms. For Still, the challenge of communicating his culture—a challenge he had little choice but to accept—meant referencing Black music to unfamiliar audiences without appearing heavy-handed. He could attempt to communicate

these references with the white, wealthy concert-going public, but they were largely ill-prepared to receive them.

Written in four movements, the symphony opens with an allusion to the final movement of the *Afro-American Symphony*, echoing its principal theme. Sprightly woodwinds needle through the winding, highly lyrical string arrangements. As the movement rises from dense and weighty to almost waltz-like and wondrous, slightly too dissonant to be entirely sentimental, stately horns interrupt any plays at nostalgia, demanding the symphony push forward.

The second movement fits a ballad into the sonata form, swaying towards a more melancholic mood—this is the ballad form of the 1930s, with highly danceable four-bar phrases. The rhythm, however, takes from the foxtrot, itself a slowed adaptation of a Southern rag. Despite its Blues origins, the slow-quick-quick pacing of the foxtrot had, through the popularity of dancers like Fred Astaire, successfully entered the concert hall. Moving without pause into the jazzier third movement, Still takes more directly from a vernacular idiom, lending an increasingly clear syncopation. With the fourth movement, muted horns spread a majesty throughout the orchestra. Yet, towards the end of the Symphony, Still cuts the return to the tonic G minor chord with an out-of-place F minor chord. Thus, a sense of caution colors this conclusion. As scholar Earnest Lamb observes, “Instead of a definitive statement about race relations, the tonic is transformed into a lingering question.”

Symphony No. 4 “Autochthonous”

Itself not an especially musical word, “autochthonous” means indigenous to, and often exemplary of, a certain place. As Still wrote of his 1947 Fourth Symphony, “the music has its roots in our own soil, and portrays—in a sense—the spirit of the American people.” How does Still address the spirit of an entire nation, and what does it mean to address it from a Black perspective?

The title alone demonstrates that, by the time of completing his “Autochthonous” symphony, Still had squarely entered his “universal” period. The Fourth Symphony’s musical aims are three-fold: engage with the classical Western European tradition, better establish an African American voice in the concert hall, and address the modernism of Still’s studies. Such an integrative approach reflects the composer’s longstanding focus on an inherently pluralistic nationalism. As he wrote, “When we all awaken to the fact that each group has something important and worthwhile to contribute to the culture of the entire country, then we will have a society that is well integrated—in which all of us will be working for a common good.”

What, then, did Still consider the important and worthwhile contributions of his own culture? For Still, the aspiration to be not just a prominent Black musician but, as he put it, “another American voice” already placed him in a slightly less separatist position than those of many peers. Langston Hughes—with whom he had a highly public break around this time after their collaborative opera, *Troubled Island*—had written, “I am ashamed for the black poet who says, ‘I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet,’ as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world.” Such were the stakes of Still seeking to be not just a Black artist, but an American artist, and, most complicatedly, a Black American artist.

Furthermore, intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance had generally diverged with Still on which elements of Black music were worth elevating to the concert hall. Though highly aware of the value of these genres, intellectuals like James Weldon Johnson and Alain Locke echoed the concerns of many middle-class African Americans who felt that jazz and the Blues presented a harmful stereotype of black sexuality. W. E. B. Du Bois had long considered spirituals “the greatest gift of the Negro people”—a position shared by prominent European composers like Antonín Dvořák.

Yet, Still, while recognizing the homegrown form of spirituals, acknowledged their white influence, and felt it time for the Black artist to “turn from the recording of Spirituals to the development of the contributions of his race, and to the work of elevating them to higher

artistic planes.” He recognized a “sincerity” in jazz, as well as a “yearning for unattainable happiness” inherent to the Blues.

Thus, while many white composers of the time had been pulling from jazz for its innovative structures and, as Aaron Copland so condescendingly put, “not so much the spirit, whatever it symbolized,” Still instead emphasized the lyrical quality of this vernacular music. This lyricism is obvious in his Fourth Symphony, a rousing celebration of the enduring American people across ethnic groups.

Built around a traditional symphonic structure—sonata-allegro, adagio, dance movement, finale—the Fourth Symphony opens imposing and broad, fueled by a slightly dissonant string melody. This dissonance and polytonality, which recall the avant-garde influences of Still’s “ultramodern” period, add strain to the momentum of the first movement. A triumphant drumroll brings the section to an elevating, almost operatic conclusion, cementing the grand sense of collaboration at the center of the piece.

The second movement takes from more folk influences, lonesomely navigated by the hesitant oboe. Such a languishing mood contrasts the cheery third movement, welcomed with a walking bassline and heavy syncopation. Brasher and brighter, the low brass gain prominence, restructuring the orchestra toward a big-band hierarchy. The strings turn somber for the final movement, leading a grandiose restatement of what has been, while glancing toward an uncertain future. Bells seem to call the orchestra to attention, marching forward with assured optimism. As Still wrote, the final movement evokes “the warmth and the spiritual side of the American people—their love of mankind.”

Sarina Benezra Bell



GIANANDREA NOSEDA

Music Director

Gianandrea Nosedà is one of the world's most sought-after conductors, equally recognized for his artistry in both the concert hall and opera house. The 2026–2027 season marks his tenth season as Music Director of the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C. where his leadership has inspired and reinvigorated the ensemble. The renewed artistic recognition and critical acclaim has led to invitations to Carnegie Hall and international concert halls, as well as digital streaming and a record label distributed by LSO Live, for which Nosedà also records as Principal Guest Conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra.

Nosedà became General Music Director of the Zurich Opera House in September 2021 and reached an important milestone in May 2024, conducting two highly praised complete *Ring* cycles. He was recognized as “Best Conductor” by the jury of the German OPER! AWARDS. Nosedà and the Zurich Opera will make history in March 2027 when Carnegie Hall presents them in the legendary hall's first-ever *Ring* cycle.

Nosedà's discography of over 80 recordings includes dozens of critically acclaimed albums with a wide range of orchestras and repertoire for various labels, including Deutsche Grammophon and Chandos.

Nosedà has conducted the most important international orchestras, opera houses, and festivals, and had significant roles at the BBC Philharmonic (Chief Conductor), Israel Philharmonic Orchestra (Principal Guest Conductor), Mariinsky Theatre (Principal Guest Conductor), Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale della RAI (Principal Guest Conductor), Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (Victor de Sabata Chair), Rotterdam Philharmonic (Principal Guest Conductor), and Stresa Festival (Artistic Director). From 2007–2018, Nosedà served as Music Director of the Teatro Regio Torino, where his leadership marked the opera house's golden era.

Working with the next generation of musicians is important to Nosedà and he has regularly collaborated with the European Union Youth Orchestra and in 2025 led a major tour of Asia with Carnegie Hall's National Youth Orchestra

of the USA. He is the founding Music Director of the Tsinandali Festival and Pan-Caucasian Youth Orchestra in the village of Tsinandali, Georgia which was established in 2019.

In autumn 2025, *The Nosedá Effect*, a documentary about Nosedá's life and artistry was released and is available on streaming services, including Carnegie Hall+, medici.tv and Mezzo.

A native of Milan, Nosedá is Commendatore al Merito della Repubblica Italiana, marking his contribution to the artistic life of Italy. He has been honored as Conductor of the Year by both *Musical America* and the International Opera Awards. He is also a recipient of the Puccini Award whose past recipients include legendary opera stars Maria Callas, Birgit Nilsson, and Luciano Pavarotti.



The NSO Music Director Chair is generously endowed by Roger Sant and Congresswoman Doris Matsui. Funding for NSO recordings is provided by generous Nosedá Era Fund supporters.

NATIONAL SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

The 2026–2027 season is the National Symphony Orchestra’s 96th and Music Director Gianandrea Noseda’s tenth season. Noseda serves as the orchestra’s seventh Music Director, joining the NSO’s legacy of distinguished leaders: Christoph Eschenbach, Leonard Slatkin, Mstislav Rostropovich, Antal Doráti, Howard Mitchell, and Hans Kindler. The NSO’s artistic leadership also includes Principal Conductor and Artistic Advisor Steven Reineke.

Since its founding in 1931, the NSO has been committed to performances that enrich the lives of its audience and community members. In 1986, the National Symphony became an artistic affiliate of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, where it has performed since the Center opened in 1971. The 96-member orchestra participates in events of national and international importance, including the annual nationally televised concerts on the lawn of the U.S. Capitol, live-streamed performances on medici.tv, and local radio broadcasts on WETA Classical 90.9 FM.

Following the launch of its eponymous recording label in 2020, the NSO has embarked on ambitious projects including its first complete Beethoven Symphony cycle and the release of the first-ever cycle of George Walker’s *Sinfonias*, both led by Noseda. Recent projects include Samuel Barber’s opera *Vanessa*, Four Symphonic Works by NSO Composer-in-Residence Carlos Simon, both also conducted by Noseda, and William Shatner’s *So Fragile, So Blue*, recorded live in the Concert Hall with the NSO under Steven Reineke.

The NSO’s community engagement and education projects are nationally recognized, and career development opportunities for young musicians include the NSO Youth Fellowship Program and its acclaimed, tuition-free Summer Music Institute.



NATIONAL SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

VIOLINS

Nurit Bar-Josef *Concertmaster*
Ying Fu *Associate Concertmaster,*
The Jeanne Weaver Ruesch Chair
Ricardo Cyncynates *Assistant Concertmaster*
Jane Bowyer Stewart
Teri Hopkins Lee
Pavel Pekarsky
Heather LeDoux Green
Joel Fuller
Lisa-Beth Lambert
Jing Qiao
Angelia Cho

Marissa Regni *Principal*
Dayna Hepler *Assistant Principal*
Desimont Alston
Cynthia R. Finks
Deanna Lee Bien
Glenn Donnellan
Natasha Bogachek
Carole Tafoya Evans
Jae-Yeon Kim
Wanzhen Li
Hanna Lee
Benjamin Scott
Malorie Blake Shin
Marina Aikawa
Peiming Lin
Derek Powell
Meredith Riley **

VIOLAS

Daniel Foster *Principal,*
The Mrs. John Dimick Chair
Abigail Evans Kreuzer *Assistant Principal*
Lynne Edelson Levine
Denise Wilkinson
James Francis Deighan
Nancy Thomas
Jennifer Mondie
Tsun Sakamoto
Ruth Wicker
Mahoko Eguchi
Rebecca Epperson

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David Hardy *Principal,*
The Hans Kindler Chair,
The Strong Family and the
Hattie M. Strong Foundation
Glenn Garlick *Assistant Principal*
Steven Honigberg
David Teie
James Lee
Rachel Young
Mark Evans
Eugena Chang Riley
Loewi Lin
Britton Riley

BASSES

Robert Oppelt *Principal*
Richard Barber *Assistant Principal*
Jeffrey Weisner
Ira Gold
Paul DeNola
Charles Nilles
Alexander Jacobsen
Michael Marks

HARP

Adriana Horne *Principal*

FLUTES

Aaron Goldman *Principal*
Leah Arsenault Barrick *Assistant Principal*
Alice Kogan Weinreb
Alyce Johnson **
Carole Bean *Piccolo*

OBOES

Nicholas Stovall *Principal*
Jamie Roberts *Assistant Principal*
Harrison Linsey
Kathryn Meany Wilson *English Horn*

CLARINETS

Lin Ma *Principal*
Eugene Mondie *Assistant Principal*
Paul Cigan
Peter Cain *Bass Clarinet*

BASSOONS

Sue Heineman *Principal*
David Young *Acting Assistant Principal*
Steven Wilson
Samuel Blair *Contrabassoon* **

HORNS

Abel Pereira *Principal*
Laurel Bennert Ohlson *Associate Principal*
James Nickel *Acting Associate Principal*
Markus Osterlund
Robert Rearden
Scott Fearing
Geoffrey Pilkington **

TRUMPETS

William Gerlach *Principal*,
The Howard Mitchell Chair,
The Strong Family and the
Hattie M. Strong Foundation
Michael Harper *Assistant Principal*
Thomas Cupples
Keith Jones
Timothy McCarthy **

TROMBONES

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Evelyn Carlson *Assistant Principal*
David Murray
Matthew Guilford *Bass Trombone*

TUBA

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WILLIAM GRANT STILL

Symphonies Nos. 2 “Song of a New Race” & 4 “Autochthonous”

Recorded live in the Concert Hall of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts
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National Symphony Orchestra
The Kennedy Center



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