


George Walker: His Story, His Song, His Legacy

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Photograph by Frank Schramm

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The year 2022 marks the anniversary of several composers and musical works. As these historic moments are recalled, it is incumbent upon the greater choral community to elevate the names and music of our underrepresented artists. Among the celebrations is the 100th anniversary of the birth of George Walker, the first African American composer to win the Pulitzer Prize in Music. Over the course of his lifetime, George Walker produced a number of sacred and secular works, encompassing an extensive range of styles, for instruments and voice alike. The diversity of his musical voice is representative of the depth and breadth of music from the African American experience, and his work is worthy of exploration for his unique contribution to music of the twentieth century.

George Walker: His Story

Trailblazing American composer, pianist, and educator Dr. George Theophilus Walker was born on June 27, 1922, in Washington D.C. His father was a practicing physician who migrated to the United States from Jamaica, West Indies, and his mother was an educator. Walker began formal piano study at five years old. A studious learner, he graduated high school at age fourteen and was admitted to Oberlin Conservatory a year later, where he studied piano and organ, earning a Bachelor of Music degree (with honors) in 1941. Subsequent study included obtaining Artist Diplomas in Composition and Piano from the Curtis Institute—where he was the first African American graduate—and a Doctor of Musical Arts Degree from the Eastman School of Music.¹

Some of his first publications are the result of a relationship Walker cultivated with Paul Kapp at General Music Publishing Company. The publishing of his earlier works coupled with the support for its performance from Kapp led to the blossoming recognition of his work. The African American Music Opportunities Association offered the emerging composer the opportunities to have his compositions performed in Avery Fisher Hall to fair reviews.² This led to future performances of his work with the major orchestras on the East Coast. By the time of his 1996 Pulitzer Prize win, he had amassed a catalog of over fifty works for both vocal and instrumental forces.

He taught, most notably, at Rutgers University-Newark, where he served as distinguished professor and chair of music from 1962 to 1992. His time at Rutgers was not without opposition, facing discrimination from colleagues. With the university-wide policy that required professors to retire at age seventy, Dr. Walker ended his work in higher education in 1992. He would continue teaching privately and through visiting professorships and residencies around the world.

George Walker's compositional output includes over 100 works for a variety of ensembles in multiple styles. Walker's earliest music is for instrumental makeup and then expands to include voice. Listening to his instrumental work *Spatials for Piano* brings to the forefront a clear use of twelve-tone writing. His monumental *Mass* is a complex work that has spanned some



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of his most virtuosic compositional output, including neo-romantic and classical tendencies, among other contemporary styles. The two settings presented in this survey are not representative of his complete compositional makeup but offer a survey of two small works.

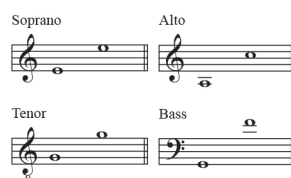
George Walker: His Song

O Praise the Lord (Psalm 117)

Publisher: Lauren Keiser Music Publishing

SATB a cappella

Time: 3 minutes



Walker penned *O Praise the Lord* for mixed chorus of four voices with incidental divisi and nine soloists. The text comes from the shortest psalm in the psalter and its entire text is used.

O praise the Lord, all ye nations: praise him,
all ye peoples.
For his merciful kindness is great toward us:
And the truth of the Lord endureth for ever.
Praise ye the Lord.

It is in ternary form with slight variation in the recapitulation. The first verse is homophonic, and the theme is clearly established by the full chorus using a perfect fourth-descending minor second-ascending second motif. The word “all” is always sung with moving eighth notes throughout the piece, which is representative of those [many people] who offer praise to God. In the first section the phrase is repeated four times—the first two iterations are homophonic between all parts; the subsequent two times are unique. The third restatement uses the tenor and bass voices singing open fifths and the treble voices entering four beats later with open fourths. The final iteration in the first section has homophonic singing at the octave.

Part two of the piece features two soprano, two alto, two tenor, and three bass soloists. Treble voices are imitative with variations of a new theme before the tenors and basses enter together with the basses singing the text at approximately half speed of the tenors. While the score specifies the number of soloists from each section, there are no more than two vocal parts in each voice and can realistically be performed with eight soloists. The end of the second

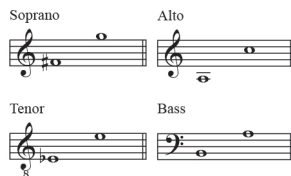
part is transitional with the full chorus offering five bars of the phrase “Praise ye the Lord.” The final section is similar to the opening section and shares an almost completely copied rhythmic makeup, though some parts are slightly varied. Similar to the five-bar ending of the second part, there is a five-bar ending that ends the piece, which in part is a response to the five bars before the third section.

Stars

Publisher: Lauren Keiser Music Publishing

SATB a cappella

Time: 2 minutes



With text penned by Susan D. Keeney, *Stars* offers musical language that is modern, contemplative, and



Photograph by Frank Schramm

intentional. The text reads:


I cannot always stand upon the peak and
touch the stars.
Sometimes the wind is thick with snow and
bleak,
And there are scars of sorrow that are long
since past.
How long they last, how long they last.

This unaccompanied song for mixed voices with incidental divisi opens with imitation—a frequent compositional device throughout this short work. The second and third lines of the text are sung by the treble voices as tenor and bass complete the former lines, and the final line is first stated by the tenor and bass with treble voices entering in canon as a response. Finally, the work ends with a retelling of the first line—unlike the polyphony stated in the beginning—now homophonic, and it is plaintive and attentive to the importance of the text. “*Stars* is the only choral work of Walker’s that maintains a consistent time signature of 3/4 throughout the entire piece and does not incorporate metrical shifts.”³

Stars is to be performed gently, as its opening markings indicate. There is a sense of ease that flows through the voices that expresses the humanity of mankind in an ever-reaching posture. While the poem mentions an attempt to touch the stars, Walker masterfully allows the stars to descend via cascading voices. One could possibly see this as a deliberate effort to bring that which can seem celestial down to earth. In two minutes, a short, largely tonal work offers its listeners a soundscape that brings the best of old and new musical styles, a unique characteristic of George Walker’s music. For one whose work is oftentimes known for its complexity, *Stars* offers a sophisticated yet attainable response.

George Walker: His Legacy

The music of George Walker is a beautiful joining of styles that provide a fulfilling experience for those who wish to present it. His choral music is best performed by mid-level and advanced ensembles, although there is output that gives amateur choirs the opportunity to experience a complete dive into this incredible music. As

our profession continues the work of bringing the music of underrepresented composers to our venues across the world, let us endeavor to ensure the musical voice of George Walker reverberates for years to come. 

Suggestions for Further Reading

Banfield, William. *Musical Landscapes in Color: Conversations with Black American Composers* (Boston: Scarecrow Press, 2003).

“Beyond Elijah Rock: The Non-Idiomatic Choral Music of Black Composers,” curated by Marques L.A. Garrett. www.mlagmusic.com/research/beyond-elijah-rock

De Lerma, Dominique-Renè. “The Choral Works of George Walker.” *American Choral Review*, USA 23/1 (1981): 1-30.

Frank J. Oteri. “George Walker: Concise and Precise,” NewMusicUSA (Sept 2017) <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/george-walker-concise-and-precise/>

Terry, Mickey. “An Interview with George Walker.” *Musical Quarterly* 84/3 (Fall 2000): 372-388.

Walker, George. *Reminiscences of an American Composer and Pianist* (Boston: Scarecrow Press, 2009).

NOTES

¹ Tom Huizenga, “George Walker, Trailblazing American Composer, Dies at 96.” NPR. NPR, August 24, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2018/08/24/641606061/george-walker-trailblazing-american-composer-dies-at-96>.

² George Walker, *Reminiscences of an American Composer and Pianist* (Boston: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 122-23.

³ Jeffrey L. Ames, “A Pioneering Twentieth Century African-American Musician: The Choral Works of George T. Walker” (Ph.D. diss., The Florida State University, 2005).

Selection of George Walker's Works for Voices, Lauren Keiser Music Publishing

Title	Instrumentation	Length
A Babe is Born	SATB chorus	5 minutes
And Wilt Thou Leave Me Thus	Baritone, piano	3 minutes
Blow, Blow Thou Winter Wind	SATB chorus	4 minutes
Emily Dickinson Songs	High voice, piano	8 minutes
Ev'ry Time I Feel de Spirit (Spiritual)	High voice, piano	4 minutes
Give Thanks Unto The Lord (Psalm 105)	SSA chorus, organ	5 minutes
Gloria in Memoriam	SSA chorus, organ	3 minutes
I Got a Letter from Jesus	Medium voice, piano	3 minutes
O Lord God of Hosts (Psalm 84)	SATB chorus, organ	5 minutes
Praise Ye The Lord (Psalm 148)	SATB chorus, organ	2 minutes
Psalm 121	SATB chorus, organ	7 minutes
Sing Unto the Lord (Psalm 96)	SATB a cappella chorus	3 minutes
Take, O Take Those Lips Away	Low voice	3 minutes
The Bereaved Maid (from Three Lyrics for Chorus)	SATB chorus	4 minutes
With This Small Key	SATB chorus	6 minutes