



Manuscript deposited
with Still's 1953 copyright
registration.

Copyright Deposit Sets Record Straight on Noted 20th-Century Song

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The Library's "Songs of America" online exhibition highlights how copyright records can help to shed light on American culture and history. To explore the American experience through song, the exhibit draws on hundreds of thousands of pieces of sheet music and sound recordings registered for copyright since 1820.

Judith Anne Still, Still's daughter, turned to the Library's Music Division for help in 2009. "She knew about the copyright registration and wanted to find the deposit to show her father's intention for the song," Wintle said.

A search succeeded in locating the deposit and proving Judith Anne Still right. The original composition ends on a consonant note, suggesting a "sense of rest and relief" that resolves grief, Wintle said. "It vastly changed the way an important 20th-century composition is interpreted."

After learning of the discovery, baritone Thomas Hampson came to the Library's Coolidge Auditorium in 2009 to record the original version of the song. A recording of his performance is available online through the "Songs of America" exhibition.

"Grief" is but one of many musical accomplishments in the stellar career of William Grant Still. He was the first African American composer to have a symphony performed by a professional orchestra. Wintle notes that the Music Division holds the original handwritten manuscript of Still's Symphony no. 1 "Afro-American," performed at Carnegie Hall in 1935. Still was also the first

African American to have an opera nationally televised and the first African American symphony orchestra conductor, according to *The Performing Arts Encyclopedia*. In addition, he set to music many poems of the Harlem Renaissance, including those of Langston Hughes, and he scored films and arranged commercial music throughout his career. Still died in 1978. ©



Baritone Thomas Hampson performed "Grief" in the Coolidge Auditorium in October 2009.

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William Grant Still

One copyright record has an especially interesting story. William Grant Still—cited as the "dean of African American composers" in *The Performing Arts Encyclopedia*—registered his composition "Grief" on June 15, 1953, depositing an

original unpublished manuscript with the Copyright Office. He wrote the music for a poem by LeRoy V. Brant.

The Oliver Ditson Music Company first published the song in 1955. A version published afterward, however, introduced an error. The final note of the vocal line in this version does not match the one before it, creating a dissonance that extends a mood of sadness through the song's end.

"This incorrect version of the song was widely performed and came to be considered authoritative," said James Wintle, a Music Division reference specialist. "For more than 50 years, the mistake was unknown by the public."

Still's family, however, felt certain Still did not mean for his composition to end the way it was being performed.