

George Walker (1922-2018)
An obituary by Kenneth Shenton



Despite the many road blocks he faced as a black African American musician attempting to make his way in a predominantly white profession, the multi-talented George Walker, who died on 23 August, aged 96, went on to become one of his country's most highly regarded and successful contemporary composers. He also enjoyed outstanding success as a concert pianist, before later becoming a noted academic. As the first black instrumentalist to receive a doctorate from the Eastman School of Music, the first black faculty member at Smith College and the first black winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1996, he proved a powerful and potent critic of all forms of racial discrimination within classical music.

The son of a Jamaican immigrant doctor who had graduated from medical school in Philadelphia in 1918, George Theophilus Walker was born in Washington D.C on 27 June, 1922. His mother worked for the Government Printing Service. Initially educated at Dunbar High School, his prodigious musical talents then took him to Oberlin College in Ohio. Graduating from the Curtis Institute in 1945, nine years later he became the first African American to receive a doctorate from the University of Rochester's Eastman School of Music. While studying at the Curtis Institute, his teachers included Rudolf Serkin, William Primrose and Gregor Piatigorsky, his first composition teacher being Rosario Scalero. He also received occasional lessons in orchestration from Gian Carlo Menotti.

Twelve months after graduating, as the recipient of a Fulbright Scholarship, Walker first came to Europe to study at the American Conservatory in Fontainebleau. There he refined his compositional technique in the company of Nadia Boulanger, also working with Robert Casadesus and Clifford Curzon. Back home, Walker initially attracted national attention by winning the Philadelphia Youth Auditions which allowed him to perform Rachmaninoff's *Third Piano Concerto* with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy. The following year, now with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, he was the soloist in the Brahms' *Second Piano Concerto*. He subsequently became the first black instrumentalist to give a solo piano recital in Manhattan Town Hall.

In 1959, he returned again to Europe to undertake a major recital tour of all the major capital cities. Four years later he visited London to perform to great critical acclaim at the Wigmore Hall. Gradually stepping back from full-time recital work, his academic career took him first to the University of Colorado Boulder, then the New School for Social Sciences, Smith College and later, the Peabody Institute of John Hopkin University. In 1969 he was appointed Professor of Music at Rutgers University.

Six years later, he became the first Distinguished Minority Chair at the University of Delaware. His countless awards accumulated over the years included a John Hay Whitney Fellowship, two Guggenheim Fellowships, three Rockefeller Fellowships and two Koussevitzky Fellowships.

Much of what he taught Walker practised in his own extensive output of compositions. This was never truer than in the early *Lyric for Strings*, completed in 1946 and dedicated to the memory of his grandmother, a former slave. This warm and nostalgic Barber-like lament has become a staple of the orchestral repertoire. Likewise, the technically challenging yet oft-recorded, *Trombone Concerto*. Fifty years later came the Pulitzer Prize winning, *Lilacs for Voice and Orchestra*. Commissioned and premiered by the Boston Symphony Orchestra and originally written for tenor and orchestra, the work was later revised for soprano voice. Its four inter-related sections are based around Walt Whitman's lament for Abraham Lincoln, *When Lilacs Last In The Dooryard Bloom'd*.

In the interim had come an extensive catalogue of works, some ninety in total, ranging from an early *String Quartet* to the delightful, *Poem For Soprano and Orchestra*. Exploring new directions was the more cerebral *Piano Sonata nu 2*. Here Walker poured his freely atonal sonorities into Baroque and Classical forms. Opening with a chaconne, amid twelve restatements of the ground bass, this tensile first movement full of contrapuntal ingenuity. An energetic *Presto* offers contrast as does an *Adagio* exploring denser chordal structures. The work ends with an *Allegretto Tranquillo* in the form of a condensed sonatina. Later piano works are notably more optimistic and melodic, rather in the manner of Aaron Copland. Like Copland, Walker too set a large number of Emily Dickinson poems.

Also occasionally incorporated into his often eclectic style are personalised references to both American as well as black folk music. The concert overture, *In Praise of Folly*, premiered by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra in 1981 and broadcast worldwide as part of the PBS Great Performance Series, ends with brief quotes from such diverse sources as *America the Beautiful*, *My Blue Heaven* and *La Cucaracha*. Likewise the *Sonata Nu. 2 for Violin and Piano* cleverly utilizes Negro Spiritual themes. A *Cello Sonata* of 1957 with its hint of autumnal Brahms and subtle nods to jazz reminds one that Walker's talents were often in demand as an arranger for Dizzy Gillespie. He also worked closely with the German band leader, James Last who, in 1968, recorded a Walker tribute album.

His big breakthrough that year came when the conductor, Paul Freeman, invited him to participate in a symposium for black composers, sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation. A performance of his *Symphony for Orchestra* soon followed and was televised nationwide. No less important was the premiere of his *Violin Concerto* by Cho-Liang Lin with the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra conducted by Hugh Wolff in St Paul, Minnesota in September, 1991. It was repeated two months later at Carnegie Hall. Six years on and the same orchestra premiered *Pageants and Proclamation* at the opening of Newark's New Jersey Performing Arts Centre. In 2012, they marked Walker's ninetieth birthday with the premiere of yet another major work, *Sinfonia nu 4 Strands*.

In later years Walker's own scholastic credentials found a ready outlet, be it as a keynote speaker, conductor or performer at summer schools, seminars and workshops throughout the Americas. Always precise, literate and stylish, he proved to be an equally fine writer. Throughout his career he would supply a wealth of finely written and knowledgeable critiques to a wide range of specialist periodicals worldwide. In 2009, he published an extensive autobiography entitled, *Reminiscences of an American Composer*, its content often reflecting on his many struggles and yet, while his fame may not have been as universal as his countryman, Aaron Copland, his popularity and no less his distinction as a Pulitzer Prize Winner were such as enjoyed by very few musicians.

Marrying Helen Siemens in July, 1960, the couple later divorced. He is survived by his two sons, Gregory and Ian.