

**The Cleveland Opera to present:
William Grant Still's *Highway 1, U.S.A.***

by Mike Telin



Family dynamics have always been the source of inspiration for great literature. There's Shakespeare's *Hamlet* — which depicts the Prince of Denmark's attempts to take revenge against his uncle, or the prime time television soap opera *Dallas*, which revolved around an affluent and feuding Texas family.

On Sunday, February 18 at 3:00 pm in The Tudor Arms Hotel Grand Ballroom, The Cleveland Opera in collaboration with the Cleveland Women's Orchestra and Duffy Liturgical Ensemble, will present a full-scale production of William Grant Still's *Highway 1,*

USA. With an original libretto by Verna Arvey, the opera explores the constantly changing and sometimes deadly dynamics of love, sacrifice, and family. Eric Benjamin conducts and Dorota Sobieska stage directs. Tickets are available [online](#).

“William Grant Still's music is outstanding and should be better known,” Sobieska said during a telephone interview. “It should be a regular item on the programs of orchestras and chamber music groups.”

Still, known as the Dean of African American composers, has an oeuvre of two hundred works that include five symphonies, four ballets, nine operas, over thirty choral works, art songs, chamber music, and solo works. He attended Wilberforce University and Oberlin Conservatory of Music.

Sobieska first discovered Still's music while searching for an American opera to add to her company's repertoire. “We've programmed a lot of Bellini, Mozart, Donizetti,

Puccini and Polish operas, so we decided to look for some treasures of this country — we are a company in the United States after all.”

The one-act opera in two scenes takes place in the home of Bob (Brian Keith Johnson) and Mary (Lauren Harris), an average couple who run a filling station on Highway 1 — which extends from Key West to Maine. In fulfillment of a promise Bob made to his mother on her deathbed, the couple have invested much of their income in supporting the education of Bob’s younger brother, Nate (Governor Harris).

The cast also includes Angeleina Valentine-Grant as Aunt Lou, Jonathan Stuckey as the Sheriff, and Frederick Taylor in “choral leadership.”

“The family dynamics in the plot are so clear, and I think this is something that everybody can relate to,” Sobieska said. “And Still’s music is very transparent, it’s like you can hold it in your hands. I don’t know how to describe it, but it’s very emotional and Verna Arvey’s libretto is so clear.”

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