Conductor's insights into black music win acclaim

By JIM KELTON
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Photo by DAN BATES
Herald Photographer

Evidently, Paul-Elliott Cobbs, the conductor of the Everett Symphony, went about his business correctly.

He walked into a room at the University of Washington, approached a board of examiners, played two brief segments of recorded music and walked out a few minutes later with a doctorate in music.

Nothing to it.

All it took was a monumental amount of research, the insight gained by a lifelong fascination with music and the cross-cultural instincts that come with late-20th century education.

After all that, what Cobbs did boiled down to one not-so-simple achievement. He demonstrated that the different techniques required to play radically divergent forms of music are the products not of racial heritage but of cultural orientation.

In short . . . well, Cobbs explains it best.

He came across a transcription of William Grant Still's "Afro-American Symphony" as well as a recording of the work in the UW library. But that was practically all he found.

"I got interested," Cobbs, 39, said. "I thought, 'If this is the leading black composer and there's nothing around then something's wrong.'

"There was no adequate analysis of the piece. Plus, I found a broader problem, and that is that musicians who trained in American conservatories are trained to play European music. This training does not enable them to play Asian-American music, Native American music, etc.

"The problem I saw is that our system doesn't address multicultural music and, because of this, the system does not allow Afro-American music to be performed with cultural authenticity."

The key word in that summation is "authenticity."

Still, who lived a long and prosperous life, completed his "Afro-American Symphony" in 1930 after he had been schooled in classical tradition and had traveled and performed extensively as a commercial instrumentalist.

He understood Bach, and he knew the blues and gospel, too.

"He played with (blues populizer) W.C. Handy," Cobbs said. "He was in New York when (singer-actress) Ethel Waters was there. He got into the blues. He visited churches in the South and copied down the music he heard there. He also trained at the New England Conservatory.

"Here is a composer who had a first-hand grasp of both cultures."

Consequently, Still hit his stride when, at age 35, he finished his "Afro-American Symphony." This was his triumph: a truly American symphony in the sense that it incorporated various classical idioms in addition to the eccentricities of black improvisation, the latter being a cornerstone of American musical know-how.

"He had it performed, and it was regarded as wonderful at the time," Cobbs said. "Then it kind of died out.

"It was well received all across the country, but Still was not happy because it wasn't understood the way he wanted it to be. People didn't share his ability to play blues and gospel, for example. They were playing the notes but it just was not the same."

Music in a multicultural key

What was missing was the inimitable touch of black American musicians, their particular specialties, their ways of using their own experiences to create a unique kind of music.

That was the originality with which Still had imbued his composition. However, it did not translate fluently into the hard-and-fast notation with which classical players are most familiar.

Still's opus encapsulated black music and elevated it to the emotional pitch of art. His symphony was filled with the call-and-response of Southern gospel singing, the very thing that gave birth to the blues and rock 'n' roll. It contained meters within meters. It was syncopated, which means to accent the offbeat, and more: It was marked by a sophisticated and complex sort of syncopation known as offbeat phrasing, which compounds the rhythm.

"When I listened to the 'Afro-American Symphony' played by the London Symphony, they didn't swing the beat," Cobbs said. "It's not on the page but, if you know the style, you know that's how it's played."

Naturally, there also are blue notes, the dissonant manipulation of notes for a distorted effect that is the heart and soul of the blues.

"There is a lot of controversy about them," Cobbs said. "There is an Afro-American tradition of playing a lowered third. The sound is happy and sad at the same time because of those blue notes.

"They're there, but they're not written specifically. The blue note is a vehicle to get from one note to the next. The action of the blue note depends on where it's resolved, whether it carries the music up or down."

They carry their own weight, in other words.

"Still believed that the blues can express every emotion," Cobbs said. "Gospel is there to compliment blues."

Essentially, Still's symphony is divided into four parts. The first is longing, a common byproduct of slavery. Sorrow comes second and represents the hopelessness of slaves freed in a nonetheless hostile world. Next comes humor.

"When you're down and out, you can be sorry or you can be philosophical and decide to have fun," Cobbs said.

The fourth and final movement of the symphony involves the sincerity of bl after the Civil War.

"The idea is, 'Yes, we're down and but we have to do better,'" Cobbs sai

That's not all, though.

"That is one meaning of the symphon Cobbs said. "But, if anybody looks de they can see that it is the story of everybody."

Cobbs takes the saga one step farth

"After I'd finished my research, I t to the Everett Symphony and then incorporated all these things into a recording to compare with the record by the London Symphony."

It worked like magic. He used the recordings to defend his thesis, and h received no arguments from those wh bestowed upon him his doctorate.

"I played the first half of each recording, and they said, 'That's enou Cobbs said.

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It was enough to prove Cobbs' point, which is, in part, that Afro-American and other forms of ethnic music are classic in their own way.

"If you're talking about American music, it's going to be a combination of all our music, and the Afro-American influence is going to play a major role in that," Cobbs said.

"When Dvorak came here (to America) in 1904, he was asked how to have insight into American music and he said, 'You have all the elements.' Music must grow plant-like. The seed is planted and it must grow from there."

As a result of his accomplishment, Cobbs has lately found himself fairly roundly celebrated in academic circles.

His thesis has been published in book form by UW. The text was sent to the Black Musical Research Institute in Chicago. Cobbs has been approached by ethnomusicologists who want to collaborate with him on future projects. He has lectured in California and Washington.

He does not, on the other hand, claim full credit for his handiwork.

"It took somebody who knew what to listen for," he said. "It took an orchestra that wanted to try something new. It took the Everett Symphony board of directors to have confidence in the project. I had to reallysell it to them (the board). Now that they have it, they love it.

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"If it's done with cultural authenticity, you should be able to feel it. Music speaks for itself."

Cobbs has nevertheless found himself at the forefront of a movement he didn't even know existed a year ago.

"I just found out that it (his study) is on the cutting edge," he said. "A new branch of the University of California in San Diego is emphasizing multicultural music."

That doesn't necessarily mean that Cobbs is taking his praise too seriously.

"I don't consider myself an authority," he said. "But all of those years growing up in Detroit (home of Motown records), and then all those years in academia — there aren't many people with this kind of background."

Paul Elliott-Cobbs

He plans to put all his knowledge to work. He cites such artists as trumpeter Wynton Marsalis as positive role models for ethnic musicians. Marsalis' recording contract calls for him to make one classical recording and one jazz album each year.

"I think Wynton dispels the myth that you have to do one or the other," Cobbs said. "If you've got soul, you can understand Beethoven. I think Beethoven would have loved the blues.

Cobbs would take a variation and improvise on it all day long. Blues and gospel are a lot closer to baroque than any other kind of classical music in the sense that you have a chord structure and you improvise on top of it.

"Blues were meant to be listened to and make you feel better later. This is something with which we can all identify."

Education plays an important part in the appreciation of such things, Cobbs believes.

"What we need now is the study of cultural diversity in grades one through 12," he said.

And there is a definite challenge inherent in that notion.

"When you think about it, this country really is a great experiment," Cobbs said. "Prince, for example, is nothing but American."

So is jazz, which whips along at a frantic pace and which is regarded worldwide as so deeply American it is synonymous with our culture.

"Jazz progresses so fast. . . ," Cobbs said. "Western classical music is slow to change by comparison. But you can hear many changes in jazz over the past 40 years.

"I think we're at a point now where we can actually see jazz progress. Swing, be-bop, cool . . . all the other styles are there if you want to hear them. What comes next is the question."

The answer to that may lie in the acceptance of Cobbs' theory of cultural influences in music. After all, has anyone else ever satisfactorily concluded that race is not a major issue when it comes to bringing together different kinds of music?

"Not to my knowledge," Cobbs said.