



MEET THE COMPOSER: William Grant Still

Age Range:	Elementary, Middle School, High School
Introduction:	Composers write music, just like authors write books. In the Class Notes “Meet the Composer” series, we will learn a little bit about the achievements, backstory, and influences of a variety of composers. Get ready to learn about these influential composers and listen to some of their music.
Total Video Time:	8:53
Total Lesson Time:	Approximately 20-25 minutes

BACKGROUND on William Grant Still

William Grant Still was born in 1895 in Mississippi and spent most of his childhood in Little Rock, Arkansas. He had an early interest in music and studied music in college. He served in the Navy during World War I and then moved to New York City to compose, conduct, and perform. He was a part of a community of African-American artists, writers, and musicians based in the Harlem neighborhood called the “Harlem Renaissance”. He became a leading figure in American classical music and died in Los Angeles in 1978.

MUSIC of William Grant Still

1. William Grant Still was known for blending elements of western classical music with elements American genres like jazz and blues. In this excerpt for his piece *Wood Notes*, see if you can identify elements of different genres, or styles, of music.

[Wood Notes](#). Composed 1948. Video approx. 3 minutes.

2. William Grant Still composed a lot of vocal music and often collaborated with writers, like the famous poet Langston Hughes. Still’s wife, Verna Arvey, was also a writer. She wrote a poem called *Arkansas*, about the state where William Grant Still grew up. Listen to a performance of the music he composed to go along with the poem.

[Arkansas](#). Composed around 1945. Video approx. 2 minutes.

3. William Grant Still composed a piece for string quartet called *Danzas de Panama*. There are four *movements*, or parts, and each movement is based on folk melodies and rhythms from the country of Panama in Central America. Listen and watch the first movement, where the string players use their hands on the body of their instruments to create percussive rhythms.

[Danzas de Panama: I. Tamborito](#). Composed 1948. Video approx. 4 minutes.



MEET THE COMPOSER:

William Grant Still, cont.

CREATE, CONNECT, & RESPOND to Still's music

1. William Grant Still collaborated with many poets, including Verna Arvey and Langston Hughes. Think more about connections between music and poetry in the Class Notes lesson [Music & Literacy: Poetry](#)
2. In his piece *Arkansas*, William Grant Still may be trying to capture the sound of home, or where he grew up. Many other composers have been inspired by the idea of "home". Learn more in the [Class Notes Themed Lesson: Home](#).

William Grant Still

FAST FACTS

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