

COMPOSING HISTORY

Paul Moravec makes America's past sing

The composer and University Professor Paul Moravec, D.M.A., has devoted his life to music, but he has another passion as well: history. Throughout his career, he's found a way to bring the two disciplines together, frequently composing works based on events or texts from America's past. His latest, *Sanctuary Road*, commissioned by the Oratorio Society of New York, premiered this spring on May 7 at Carnegie Hall.

"It's a historical oratorio based on the memoir of William Still, a conductor on the Underground Railroad," he said. "Mark Campbell, a librettist I work with, suggested it as a source. He wrote a splendid libretto based on the historical record."

Still's memoir, *The Underground Railroad*, was published in 1872, and is filled with testimony from fugitive slaves he helped deliver to freedom. Five soloists bring to life the stories of Still and several of the fugitives, backed by an orchestra and a chorus that comments on the stories and occasionally serves as dramatic participants.

"I have long considered the Underground Railroad an especially inspiring and fascinating subject for music-dramatic treatment," Dr. Moravec wrote for the Carnegie Hall program. "The epic nature of this historical saga brings to my mind the Old Testament oratorios of Handel and the *Passions* of Bach. Along these lines, when William Still narrates 'the death struggles of slaves in their efforts of freedom,' his role is similar to that of Bach's Evangelists."

Dr. Moravec considers William Still a fascinating subject too, one that, surprisingly, has yet to be explored in a comprehensive, full-length biography. Still's father was a slave who had bought his freedom, his mother had escaped slavery only after a failed attempt, and he had siblings who remained—and died—in servitude. A staunch abolitionist, he was a prominent leader of Philadelphia's African American community.

"Mr. Still has an amazing life story, so someone will eventually write his biography," Dr. Moravec said. "I hope *Sanctuary Road* might in some small way help make this happen by bringing his name to wider attention."

Dr. Moravec is now putting the final touches on another musical work, a song cycle based on the poems of a very well-known American and Long Islander, Walt Whitman. *A New Country* sets to music some of Whitman's poetry about immigrants, mostly those from Ireland. "The songs are about immigration, but it's also about the remarkable diversity of New York," Dr. Moravec said. "Whitman called New York 'the city of the world.'"

A New Country will premiere at the Bridgehampton Chamber Music Festival on August 19.

Dr. Moravec's history-based works stretch back many years. In 2013, he turned to his longtime interest in Benjamin Franklin to create *The King's Man*, a one-act opera about the Founding Father's fraught relationship and final break with his illegitimate son, William. *The Blizzard Voices*, an oratorio and musical adaptation of the poet Ted Kooser's eponymous book, dramatizes the great blizzard of 1888 that killed thousands on the Great Plains; it premiered at Omaha Opera in 2008. Six years earlier, he wrote the cantata *Spirit* to commemorate the 75th anniversary of Charles Lindbergh's transatlantic flight, which originated at Roosevelt Field on Long Island; written for the students of Garden City High School, it was based on the pilot's memoir. Dr. Moravec's *Songs of Love and War*, a cantata that sets to music letters written to and from soldiers fighting in the Civil War, both World Wars and Vietnam, was first performed in 1997.

American history and writers are not his only muses, though. His best-known work, *Tempest Fantasy*, was inspired by the Shakespeare play. Premiered at the Morgan Library in New York City in a performance by Adelphi's ensemble-in-residence, Trio Solisti, and clarinet soloist David Krakauer, it won the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2004.

The Pulitzer Prize is one of many honors Dr. Moravec has received. He has won a Rome Prize Fellowship from the American Academy in Rome, a Guggenheim Fellowship, three awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation. He has served as artist-in-residence at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, and he was elected to membership in the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia in 2010.

In many ways, history is a wholly natural inspiration and subject for a composer. As Dr. Moravec explained, music and history share an inextricable bond. "Time is the medium of music and memory is the mediator," he wrote in the *Sanctuary Road* program. "In its sublime, mysterious way, music remembers."

"Composing the music for this oratorio," he continued, "I was guided by my intention to memorialize the spirit and events of this extraordinary chapter in American history. As William Still sings about the slaves he aided on their road to freedom, 'Their testimony will never be forgotten.'"



Paul Moravec, D.M.A., recipient of the 2004 Pulitzer Prize in Music and numerous other awards, is the composer of dozens of orchestral, chamber, choral, operatic and lyric pieces, many of them commissioned by notable ensembles and major music institutions. A graduate of Harvard College and Columbia University, he has taught at Columbia, Dartmouth College and Hunter College. A section of manuscript for one of his works appears in the background here.