

Symphony honors composer

BY GREG WAXBERG
Special to Northeast Ledger

Three university choirs from across the state will join music director Crafton Beck and the Mississippi Symphony Orchestra to celebrate the life and music of William Grant Still, born in Woodville in 1895 and considered the dean of African-American composers.

"William Grant Still: Celebrating an American Master Composer" begins at 7:30 p.m. Friday at Thalia Mara Hall in Jackson. His daughter, Judith Anne Still, will be the evening's guest of honor.

Still wrote operas, ballets, symphonies, chamber music and choral and vocal works, including spirituals.

"William Grant Still is yet another one of those native Mississippians who has brought great honor to our state in that he was among the first African Americans to conduct a national level orchestra and wrote significant orchestral and choral works," said Michael Beattie, the orchestra's president and executive director.

This will be the first of five concerts produced by the Mississippi Arts Commission, with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts as part of its American Masterpieces Initiative. The NEA began this program two years ago to help Americans learn about their cultural

IF YOU GO

- Tickets: \$15 for adults; \$5 for children ages 4-18 and college students.
- To purchase in advance: (601) 960-1565 or www.msorchestra.com.
- Tickets also will be available at the box office at 6:30 p.m. Friday.
- More information is available on the events calendar on the Arts Commission's Web site, www.arts.state.ms.us.

and artistic legacy, and the organization is sponsoring performances, exhibitions, tours and educational programs in each state.

The Arts Commission received \$49,300 from the NEA and was awarded a grant of \$50,000 from The Phil Hardin Foundation, based in Meridian. The foundation's mission is to improve teaching and learning for Mississippi students.

"Each state is allowed to select the master artist it wants to promote," said Lee Ann Powell, deputy director of the Mississippi Arts Commission. "We chose William Grant Still. Still's symphonic works are widely recorded and played, but his choral works are much more obscure. We saw this as a way to both promote Still's works and engage the college and university choral community."

The Jackson State University

Concert Chorale, Mississippi State University Chamber Singers and William Carey University Chorale will participate.

"We are building a program that introduces the life of William Grant Still," Beck said. "The master of ceremonies will narrate his life in between pieces, to introduce the pieces (and) on top of pieces. We're going to do some of his instrumental works, and we're going to do one or two movements from the *Afro-American Symphony*, but we're also doing some other music of the period."

Other music will range from Ferde Grofe's *Mississippi Suite* to Duke Ellington's *The River*. Among Still's compositions, the program features spirituals, *Psalm for the Living*, excerpts from the Festive Overture and ballet *Lenox Avenue* and Beck's arrangement of *Mississippi*.

The remaining concerts will take place at the University of Mississippi on Sunday, Delta State on Monday, the MSU Riley Center in Meridian on Nov. 9 and at Southern Mississippi on Nov. 11.

Those performances will feature

the Alcorn State University Concert Choir, Delta State University Chorale, Rust College A Cappella Choir, University of Mississippi Concert Singers and University of Southern Mississippi Chorale and Choral Union.



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William Grant Still grew up in Woodville in far southwest Mississippi, against all odds becoming a world famous composer.