

Composer of the month

BBC
RADIO

3

Composer of the Week
is broadcast on Radio 3
at 12pm, Monday to

Friday. Programmes in July are:
27 June – 1 July Billy Strayhorn
4–8 July Tour de France: Rameau
11–15 July Tour de France: Montgeroult
18–22 July Tour de France: Ravel
25–29 July Beethoven

George Walker's style



Determined individualist
Walker eschewed association with other composers and his music is uncategorisable by distinct musical

schools. He didn't include his graduation piece, a violin sonata, in his catalogue as it 'sounded too much like Brahms'. Each piece was designed to be unique, sounding nothing like his previous works.

Increasing complexity His music is that of an elegant master-craftsman, highly detailed with a harmonic language that becomes increasingly complex with age. But in his music there is nothing overly embellished or ornate – only that which serves the precise structure of the piece.

Counterpoint and chromaticism Walker combines an intense obsession with counterpoint with an unconventional display of chromaticism. Almost never truly serial or atonal, devices include octatonic scales (used in his wind ensemble piece *Canvas*) and quartal harmonies.

Musical quotations Walker's music contains frequent quotations from spirituals, jazz and folk music in brilliantly subtle ways. Instead of overt references, he disguises them with rhythmic diversions, reharmonisations and embellishments (such as *Solitude* by Duke Ellington, above, in his Piano Concerto).

George Walker

Over the course of a long career, the American produced works as individual as they were immaculately crafted, says *Elizabeth de Brito*

ILLUSTRATION: MATT HERRING

George Walker boasts one of the longest compositional careers in history, writing well into his 90s. In his prolific career, he produced over 90 works, an enviable array of masterpieces including concertos for trombone and piano, five piano sonatas, five symphonies, brass quintets, wind quintets, song cycles and more. He wrote most extensively, though, for stringed instruments, with a Violin Concerto and Cello Concerto, sonatas for cello, violin and viola and two string quartets to his name.

But as well as being an extraordinary composer and musician, he was a trailblazer for black people. Racism

down a scholarship to Howard University itself, he chose instead to study away from home at Oberlin Conservatory, Ohio. In doing so, he became not only the youngest, but also the only black student at the prestigious institution, the first of many such instances in which he would tread a path for others to follow.

It was with the initial intention of becoming a concert pianist – and on a full scholarship – that Walker entered Oberlin. During his time there, he was exposed to some of the great pianists of the age, including Rachmaninov, who he saw perform live in 1938 in 'a memorable concert' that left a great impression.

Racism would offer numerous setbacks, derailing Walker's career as a concert pianist

would offer numerous setbacks during his lifetime, derailing his career as a concert pianist and ensuring he would consistently struggle for his work to be recognised. But now that we are in his centenary year, as new recordings emerge and performances and studies increase, hopefully George Walker can enter the canon as one of the greatest American composers, his genius truly recognised.

Born and raised in Washington D.C., Walker grew up in a supportive, nurturing household full of music, his father a well-respected local physician. Young George began piano lessons at the age of five, quickly displaying every sign of being a prodigy. At ten, he was enrolled at the local Howard University's music prep school, from which he would graduate at just 14. He would also find early employment as a musician during church services. Turning

Oberlin also offered him his first performance opportunities, and at his senior recital he played Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto with the conservatory orchestra, receiving a standing ovation from the packed house. Studying composition with Normand Lockwood, he also wrote his first pieces, the *Caprice* for piano and *Responses* for voice and piano.

After graduating with honours in 1941, he went on to attend the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, studying piano with Rudolf Serkin, composition with Rosario Scalero and orchestration with Gian Carlo Menotti. Among the lifelong friends he made there were the fellow future pianists Walter Hautzig, Jacob Lateiner and Seymour Lipkin, who would later conduct the world premiere of his *Lyric for Strings* in 1946 – originally part of his String Quartet No. 1 written as



Taking notes: (left) George Walker watches on as James DePreist and the Juilliard Orchestra rehearse his *Sinfonia No. 3*, 2007; (below) the composer's son, violinist Gregory Walker

a postgraduate, it would go on to become known as Walker's most famous piece.

Walker left Curtis in 1945 with two artist diplomas in piano and composition, that same year giving his debut recital at Town Hall in New York in a programme that included his own Piano Sonata No. 2. Two weeks later, his debut with the Philadelphia Orchestra, in Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto under Eugene Ormandy, followed. Yet, despite these successes, progress proved tough, due to his race. 'It took me five years to get concert management,' he later recalled. 'I had friends who had done what I had done, and they got management immediately. But I was the most gifted piano student at Curtis. Everybody knew that, yet they were the ones that got management. I went to Europe and played in seven countries because I thought it would help get concerts here. It didn't.'

In 1950, he finally secured management with National Concert Artists, the first black instrumentalist to be signed to a major management company. Engagements still proved elusive, though, even when the concerts he did play met with acclaim. 'Those successes were meaningless,' he told the *New York Times* in 1982, 'because without the sustained effect of follow-up concerts my career had no momentum. And because I was black, I couldn't get either major or minor dates.'

In the meantime, the studies continued, as did the trailblazing. After becoming

the first African American to earn a doctorate at New York's Eastman School of Music in 1956, he received a Fulbright fellowship to study with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. 'You are a composer!' proclaimed the legendary pedagogue at his first lesson, describing his



'You are a composer!' proclaimed Nadia Boulanger at Walker's first lesson in Paris

Piano Sonata No. 2 as 'a masterpiece'. She would become an important mentor.

The 1960s saw the beginning of what would be a long career in academia, with most of the decade spent teaching piano at Smith College, in 1968 becoming its first black tenured professor. The stable income of a teaching position afforded him the opportunity to devote more time to composition, and in 1964 he won the Harvey Gaul Prize for his Sonata for Two Pianos. Other works from this period include *Antiphony for Chamber Orchestra*, *Spatialis* for piano (his only 12-tone work), *Perimeters* for clarinet and piano and his Second String Quartet. And

further success came with a Guggenheim fellowship and a visitor professorship at the University of Colorado before he became a full tenured professor at Rutgers University in 1969, a post he would hold until his retirement in 1992.

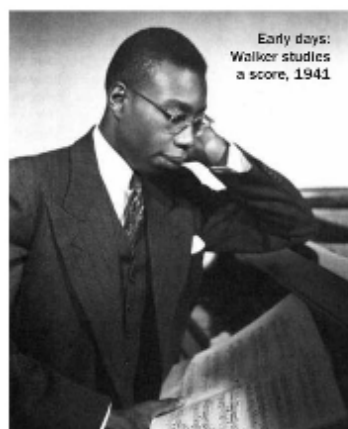
It was in 1971, just short of his 50th birthday, that Walker gained his first recording contract, performing several of his own piano works including Sonata No. 2, *Spatialis* and *Spektra*. In addition, Natalie Hinderas recorded his First Piano Sonata, and further fame came in 1973 with the Black Composer Series – the now iconic CBS Masterworks series included a recording of his Trombone Concerto and *Lyric for Strings*, performed by the LSO under Paul Freeman.

Walker was becoming well-established with a steady stream of commissions that would continue throughout the rest of his life. In 1975, the National Endowment of the Arts commissioned his Piano Concerto, premiered by the Minneapolis Symphony and Paul Freeman and later recorded by Hinderas. He was also greatly respected by fellow pianists such as Leon Bates,

who commissioned and premiered his Third Piano Sonata in 1976, and Frederick Moyer, who commissioned his Fourth Piano Sonata in 1985, later recording it. The 1980s also brought major works such as his Cello Concerto, commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, and *An Eastman Overture*, commissioned by his alma mater the Eastman School.

It was in 1995 that the Boston Symphony commissioned him to write a piece for voice and orchestra honouring the great black tenor Roland Hayes. The resulting *Lilacs* – which set the Whitman poem 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd', a reflection on the assassination of Abraham Lincoln – saw Walker become the first African-American to win the Pulitzer Prize for Music. To mark the achievement, Washington D.C. Mayor Marion Berry later declared 17 June George Walker Day to honour and commemorate a composer born and raised in the city.

Now an octogenarian, Walker's compositional output took on greater



Early days:
Walker studies
a score, 1941

innovations after his retirement from teaching. His extraordinary Violin Concerto of 2008 was a present for his son Gregory, an eminent violinist and composer who would go on to record it with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Walker followed this up with another gift for Gregory in 2011: the short but intense encore *Bleu*. Family connections were important to the composer, whose 1971 *Lament* was written in his grandmother's memory and whose 1991 *Poème* for violin and orchestra was dedicated to his mother.

In 2017, a year before his death, the 95-year-old Walker saw a lifelong dream fulfilled when Chineke! performed the UK premiere of his *Lyric for Strings* at the BBC Proms. Nearly 70 years separate that early masterpiece with Walker's final completed work, 2015's *Sinfonia No. 5 'Visions'*, which, spurred by the Charleston massacre, combines Walker's own spoken text with the orchestra in a powerful tribute to the victims.

This year – 27 June – marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of George Walker, whose remarkable career took him from a youthful piano prodigy to a nonagenarian genius of compositional complexity. Thanks not least to Albany Records, with whom he enjoyed a long recording relationship, we are able to enjoy a great deal of his music, much of it performed by Gregory, its finest interpreter. His centenary year is surely the perfect time to explore his life, music and legacy as one of the great American composers. ©

BBC George Walker's *Variations Proms for Orchestra, Trombone Concerto and Lilacs* are performed at the Proms on 26 July, 16 August and 2 Sept

GEORGE WALKER *Life & Times*



1922

LIFE: George Walker is born on 27 June in **Washington D.C.** His father George is a doctor who emigrated from Jamaica, where his own father was a slave.

TIMES: At a ceremony in Washington D.C., former US president William H Taft dedicates the recently completed Lincoln Memorial and presents it to the current president, Warren G Harding.

1946

LIFE: As a graduate student at the Curtis Institute, he composes his *Lyric for Strings*, originally entitled 'Lament' and intended as the second movement of his String Quartet No. 1.

TIMES: The inhabitants of the Bikini Atoll group of islands in the Pacific are forcibly relocated to allow for Operation Crossroads, a pair of nuclear weapons tests, to be carried out by the US.



1982

LIFE: The New York Philharmonic commissions and performs his Cello Concerto, with **Lorne Munroe** as soloist. He

later revises the work and re-titles it *Movements for Cello and Orchestra*.

TIMES: The US businessman and journalist Al Neuharth launches *USA Today*. The newspaper's use of colour photos and graphics attracts some critics, but soon proves a major game-changer.

2018

LIFE: Having continued composing well into his tenth decade, he dies aged 96 in Montclair, New Jersey. He is buried in the town's Mount Hebron Cemetery.

TIMES: InSight, NASA's Interior Exploration using Seismic Investigations, Geodesy and Heat Transport research robot, lands at Elysium Planitia on Mars.

1960

LIFE: He marries the Canadian pianist and musicologist Helen Siemens, a devoted champion of black composers

and, like him, a Fulbright scholar and pupil of Nadia Boulanger.

TIMES: Following a visit to Africa, the British prime minister **Harold Macmillan** makes his 'Winds of Change' speech, signalling the

imminent independence of several colonies in the continent.

1996

LIFE: He wins the Pulitzer Prize for Music for his Whitman-setting *Lilacs* for soprano and orchestra, becoming the first ever African-American composer to do so.

TIMES: At the Summer Olympics in Atlanta, US sprinter **Michael Johnson** wins the men's 400m and 200m, breaking the world record with a time of 19.32 seconds in the latter event.

