

Rudolph Dunbar

A Musician for the Ages!

One day someone will make a movie about Rudolph Dunbar.

The year was 1945 and Hitler and his troops were invading Europe. Berlin was the seat of Nazi culture but the Philharmonic Orchestra was led by a black conductor. He was a war correspondent for the United States but it was the baton that took him to the realm of the Gods. This conductor was a Guyanese who bestrode the musical world like a giant. Rudolph Dunbar mesmerized the 2000 Berliners in the audience. They applauded rapturously as he took them through the works of Weber's Oberon and Tchaikovsky's Pathétique. Rudolph Dunbar was given five standing ovations. During the performance Dunbar did the unthinkable. He introduced music from the Afro-American symphony to the delight of the audience. On that evening Rudolph Dunbar created history. He had become Berlin's first black conductor.

The Chicago Tribune of September 3, 1945 carried a historic headline that read, "Negro gets Ovation for Leading Berlin Symphony Concert: Rudolph Dunbar, a slender young Negro who learned his music in New York, led the Berlin Philharmonic orchestra today in a concert of classical music and American syncopation. He won an ovation of astonishing warmth." They forgot to mention that Dunbar was a Guyanese.

His baton, love of music and his ability to try new ensembles ensured that Dunbar would reach heights where only few could enter. There were many questions asked, not least by the music

critics of the day. How was it possible that this young man growing up in colonial Guyana could master Wagner, improvised on Tchaikovsky and add new dimensions to their original works?

For music historians Rudolph Dunbar remains an enigma. Having scaled his own Everest he championed many causes, and had luck smiled at him things could have been different. What really happened that made Dunbar a footnote in the world of classical music? Over the years a few scholars have tried to unravel this tantalizing tale and add new life to the story of this brilliant son of Guyana.

Rudolph Dunbar was born in Nabaclis, in British Guiana, in 1907. At that time the colony was geared to produce sugar for England and indenturedship was still in practice. In this stratified society, the British Guiana Militia Band added a much needed diversion to life. It had connections to the Royal Military School of Music in England. One of the distinguished luminaries was none other than Major S. W. Henwood, as Director.

As a boy Rudolph Dunbar would visit the bandstand. One day, he heard pieces of Elgar and Wagner. The music made a deep impression on him. Young Dunbar knew from that moment that he had to explore and learn more about this music. He continued to visit the bandstand and when he was 14 years old luck came his way. He was allowed to join the band as an apprentice playing the clarinet. Dunbar would spend the next five years with the Militia Band

mastering the clarinet.

The musicians realized that Dunbar was no ordinary apprentice. He had real talent, a gift for the clarinet. When he was 19, Dunbar left the shores of his native British

with Felix Weingartner in Vienna. The world of Rudolph Dunbar was taking a turn for greater things and few could have foreseen what happened in 1930. His reputation as a clarinetist

remains to this day, the standard work on the clarinet. While in Britain, Dunbar was the leader of two jazz groups, the 'All British Colored Band and Rudolph Dunbar and his African polyphony'. He made recordings with both of them that set a trend for British Jazz. But it was in 1938, that Dunbar achieved what many considered to be his finest hour. He composed a ballet score "Dance of the Twenty First Century". This was written for Cambridge University and it was broadcast nationally on NBC television with Dunbar as the conductor.

During his illustrious career, Rudolph Dunbar brought off a number of "firsts". For example, he was the first black man to conduct the London Philharmonic Orchestra (1942) at the famous Royal Albert Hall. He was also the first black person to conduct the Berlin Philharmonic orchestra (1945), the first black person to conduct a Festival of American Music in Paris (1945) and the first black man to conduct an orchestra in Poland in 1959 and Russia in 1964. Dunbar was also an activist. He fought for opportunities for blacks. He promoted the compositions of black composers in Europe, particularly those of William Grant Still.

When he conducted the London Philharmonic at the Royal Albert Hall Dunbar used it as an occasion to raise money for colored soldiers fighting in the War. He was also a war correspondent and he even took part in the Normandy Landings with a black regiment. In 1944 the Americans entered Paris and a journalist, Ollie Stewart, who was with Dunbar reports, "Rudolph Dunbar and I were walking along the street yesterday, and at least a dozen women brought their babies and children to us to be kissed."

Dunbar gave concerts in many parts of the world but perhaps the most emotional of all occurred in July of 1951. In that year Rudolph Dunbar returned to British Guiana and was invited to conduct the Militia Band in which he played as a child. As Guyanese cheered an elderly man walked to the stage at the end of the concert. He was Sergeant Major E. A. Carter, who 30 years earlier, had introduced Dunbar to music and the clarinet. It was indeed a great moment.

The colonial government voted to give five thousand pounds to Dunbar to show their appreciation to him for "contributions to the Empire". At his American debut, British cameras couldn't get enough of Dunbar. This led him to remark that, "they want to show these films in the colonies and say, 'look what we have done for Dunbar' - but it is not the British who have done this for me, it is the Americans."



Rudolph Dunbar, Conductor, Clarinetist, Author and War Correspondent and a gift to Guyana.



had grown so great that the widow of the famous Claude Debussy invited him to give a private recital in her apartment for members of the Paris Conservatoire. This was an honor that Dunbar took with great humility.

It was now time for the young Guyanese to make his mark in England. He moved to London in 1931 and started as a music critic. But it was not long before he established England's first clarinet school that attracted students from all over the world. As his reputation grew, he was asked to write a book on the clarinet. After months of hard work, Rudolph Dunbar published "Treatise on the Clarinet" (Boehm System) in 1939. This book became an instant classic and was reprinted through ten editions. It

Guiana, for New York, to pursue his musical dreams. He found New York to be a busy place with a healthy appreciation for classical music. His ability was such that he was accepted to study at New York's prestigious Institute of Musical Art (now Juilliard). He studied musical composition and clarinet and piano.

After five years in New York, it was time for Rudolph Dunbar to broaden his musical horizons in Paris. There he played with the greats such as Philippe Gaubart and Louis Caluzac. He also spent some time