

GEORGE WALKER

Born June 27, 1922 in Washington, D.C.

Sinfonia No. 4, "Strands" (2011)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Newark, New Jersey, March 30, 2012

New Jersey Symphony Orchestra
New Jersey Performing Arts Center
Jacques Lacombe, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 13 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, piano, harp and strings

George Walker, born in Washington, DC in 1922, began the study of piano at age five. George started formal piano lessons soon thereafter and gave his first public recital at Howard University when he was fourteen. As precocious in academics as he was in music, he graduated from the competitive Dunbar High School that same year and then attended Oberlin College in Ohio on a full scholarship; he graduated at age eighteen with highest honors in his class. Advanced study of piano (with Rudolf Serkin), orchestration (Gian Carlo Menotti), chamber music (William Primrose and Gregor Piatigorsky) and composition (Rosario Scalero) at the renowned Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia followed; in 1945, he became the school's first black graduate to receive Artist Diplomas in both piano and composition. Later that year Walker made his New York Town Hall debut and appeared as soloist in Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra (his prize for winning the Philadelphia Youth Auditions), both again firsts for a black instrumentalist. Further piano study in France in 1947 helped prepare him for several years as a touring virtuoso in Europe and America.

Walker taught at Dillard University in New Orleans in 1954-1955 before completing his doctoral degree after just one year at the Eastman School in Rochester; the Piano Sonata No. 2 of 1956 was his dissertation. Following his graduation, Walker returned to France for two years on a Fulbright Fellowship and a John Hay Whitney Fellowship to study composition with Nadia Boulanger. After again concertizing successfully in Europe, he returned to America and thereafter taught at the Dalcroze School of Music and New School for Social Research in New York City (1960-1961), Smith College (1961-1968, where he became the first black tenured faculty member), University of Colorado (1968-1969), Rutgers University (1969-1992, where he chaired the Music Department), Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins University (1975-1978) and University of Delaware (1975-1976, where he was the recipient of the first Minority Chair established by the University).

Among Walker's many honors are the 1996 Pulitzer Prize in Music (for his *Lilacs* for Voice and Orchestra), induction into the American Classical music Hall of Fame, honorary doctorates from Lafayette College, Oberlin College, Montclair State University, Bloomfield College, Curtis Institute of Music, Spelman College and the Eastman School, grants and fellowships from the Guggenheim, Rockefeller, Koussevitzky, Fromm and MacDowell foundations, membership in the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and commissions from the National Endowment for the Arts, Library of Congress, Cleveland Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, Boston Symphony, Kennedy Center and other leading ensembles and institutions. George Walker's compositions, which have been performed by every major orchestra in the United States and by many in Europe, South America and Canada as well (his *Lyric for Strings* is the most frequently performed work by a living American composer), include: a symphony; concerted works for piano, trombone and cello; several independent orchestral scores; five sonatas for solo piano and one for two pianos; two string quartets; two violin sonatas; a Mass for soloists, chorus and orchestra; several songs and numerous other smaller works. His recent compositions include the Concerto for Violin and Orchestra (2007), *Foils: Hommage à Saint George* (2006) and Sinfonia No. 4 ("Strands," 2012).

Walker's Sinfonia No. 4 ("Strands") was commissioned by the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and National Symphony Orchestra through the Meet The Composer's Commissioning Music/USA program, which is made possible by generous support from the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and Helen F. Whitaker Fund. Jacques Lacombe conducted the work's first performance, with the NJSO, on March 30, 2012. Walker describes the Sinfonia as "complex, intense and compact. I wanted to compose a work that was more than an overture or extended fanfare. The subtitle 'Strands' refers to the intertwining of various melodic

elements that are unrelated to each other. Two of those strands are the initial phrases of spirituals. The Sinfonia begins with an introduction that consists of several sections before the principal theme is stated. This theme recurs several times. The quotation of the first spiritual provides a pensive relief from the proclamatory nature of the theme that precedes it. The briefer snippet of the second spiritual is affirmative. The following section consists of a melodic bass line over which fragmented interjections are superimposed. A similar section recurs, combining with the opening phrase of the second spiritual played by the piano during the course of the work. The bass material appears briefly in the coda.”