William Grant Still has long been recognized as a gifted orchestral composer and arranger; however, few realize that his true passion was opera composition. Despite concerted effort, Still did not enjoy the degree of success in opera that he achieved in the orchestral and jazz fields. Only four of his eight completed operas have been performed, and one of these, *Minette Fontaine*, was premiered posthumously.

Still's operatic history was not without high points, however. In particular, the debut of his opera *Troubled Island* in 1949 marked the first world premiere for the New York City Opera Company. The composer managed to interest smaller companies in *Highway 1, USA*, and *The Pillar*, but he was especially determined to see one of his works performed by the Metropolitan Opera. Still never interested the company in his works, however, leaving a lifelong goal unfulfilled.

This project seeks to explore Still's operatic style to determine his compositional traits and ideals and to situate them in a contemporary context. Central to this examination are libretto sources, sketches, short scores, and autograph fair copies of orchestral and piano/vocal scores. A study of speeches, essays, letters, and articles written by Still and his wife, Verna Arvey, reveals the composer's views on the state of American opera, as well as what he hoped to contribute to the genre. Possible influences on his style are also investigated, particularly those from operatic, musical theatre, and jazz traditions. Although several aspects of Still's style, including small- and large-scale forms, character and voice types, and usage of recurring motives, reflect operatic influences, musical theatre seems to have inspired other elements, such as the use of singer-dancers, and the concentration of vocal writing in the middle of singers' ranges. Other features, particularly orchestral timbres and harmonic resources, echo jazz traditions.

This thesis demonstrates that Still was a composer who applied his own creativity to some of the more popular trends of the time. It also reveals a man who faced the challenge of trying to define “American” opera, and was willing to stay true to his chosen path despite all opposition.