



Charles White
FIVE GREAT AMERICAN NEGROES
1939

WHITE CITIES by Gerald Clayton

Musical tribute to Charles White

Inspired by LACMA's Charles White Exhibit

White Cities. A single life spread across three vibrant American cities: Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles.

I chose the title as a bold statement that puts race right at the forefront of the music, as White did with his art. I want people to consider the whiteness of all the cities as a reminder of the overarching oppression pervading each place where White lived—and that his expression, birthed as the blues, is a testifying of the black experience in a white world.

The title also refers to the artist himself. It is my intention to musically represent the evolution of Charles White's heart and mind—not just the subjects and messages of his works, but an accompanying examination of the person who created the works. Essentially a dedication to the man, his work, and the source of inspiration behind his works.

Each composition reflects one of five sections of White's 5 Great American Negroes mural. I composed a different melody for each figure, and chose to intercut their melodic themes throughout the piece as a way to represent the dual experience of sight-reading and close-reading the mural in

its entirety. I used the characteristics of the three cities and White's world outlook as the broad outline for the music. I then imposed that outline across the 5 Great American Negroes mural. So the piece begins in Chicago with two melodies inspired by Sojourner Truth and Booker T Washington. Then we move to the center of the mural and hear a New York inspired piece in dedication to Frederick Douglass. Finally, we land in Los Angeles, as the music points to the right side of the mural—a treatment of Marian Anderson's "Hear Da Lambs A-Cryin'," followed by a sort of scientific exploration of that piece as a nod to George Washington Carver.

While the 5 compositions may exist as individual pieces, together as White Cities they represent movements of a single suite reflective of moving across White's mural from left to right. I drew inspiration from different aspects of White's work that include the figures themselves, their contributions, their immortalized expressions through White's artistic lens, and the spectrum of my emotional reactions to each section and the mural as a whole.

Gerald Clayton