## Black Composers

By Al White

The "Fanfare of Black Composers," a series of five concerts by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, under the baton of Paul Freeman, a black conductor, tributed black composers of serious classical music whose works are seldom played by the great orchestras.

This "Festival" comes some forty years after a similar, but much more modest program was attempted by a black conductor leading a black aggregation during the WPA

The man behind the idea was William Lawrence, one time accompanist for the great tenor, the late Roland Hayes. Lawrence brought together a highly talented - group of black musicians already on the WPA organizing them into the "Harlem Sinfionetta," which is defined as a "little symphony, smaller in structure, slighter in orchestration." It's purpose, to present classic musical compositions by black composers.

Mr. Lawrence was conductor-an unusual position for him, but not too difficultfor as an authority Gustav Mahler once said and quoted in "The Book of Musical Knowledge," there are no great orchestras, only great conductors' a moot statement. Even the great Arthur Fiedler, for 48 years conductor of the Boston symphony, couldn't make a high. school orchestra sound like the Philharmonic, but a less talented conductor can ruin a fairly good organization.

This was not the case with Bill Lawrence. He knew what he wanted, he knew what he was doing. So the first task was naming a capable concert master, a highly important man to a symphony, being second to the conductor. Lawrence selected violinist Allie Ross for this position.

PAGE 26



CONDUCTOR PAUL FREEMAN In action at the Richmond Mosque

Ross not only knew music, having been violi nist in Ford Dabney's celebrated orchestra at Florenz Ziegfeld's Roof Garden when fabulous comic Bert Williams was a Ziegfeld star, he later conducted the pit orchestra at the Lafayette Theater until the WPA took over the house for the Federal Theater group. He was close to the musicians and had their respect. Lawrence was from a different strata, seldom associating with theater musicians.

The men in the "Sinfionetta" were artists playing such unusual instruments as the French Horn, the Bassoon, the Oboe, violas, cellos, flutes, piccolos and instruments usually associated with symphonies. The men owned their precious instruments, having clung to them despite the hardships they endured. So making the "Sinfionetta" was a rewarding honor.

The group met daily, except Saturdays and Sundays, diligently rehearsing for hours in the new building of

Black composers have produced some serious music seldom played by the great orchestras

the Harlem branch YMCA in West 135th Street. While they played the works of many black composers, the general favorite was the Chevalier de Saint Georges, court musician to Louis XVI and favorite of Marie Antoinette.

"The solidly proportioned mulatto" as one historian described him, was born in the French West Indian island of Guadeloupe in 1739 of mixed parentage - his mother a black — at an early age, he was taken to Paris to be trained in music by the best available teachers.

Soon, his talents won recognition with the appointment as court musician. He was also an army officer, fiercely loyal to his monarchs. In some writings the handsome Saint Georges is listed as being one of Marie Antoinette's three favorite courtiers.

It is a fact, Saint Georges on several occasions, warned Marie Antoinette of enemy plots against her. To avoid further involvement. Saint Georges left the court of his own volition. His marvelous music survives.

The "Sinfionetta" featured soloist was lyric tenor, Leviticus Lyons, a postal employee. A brilliant singer, Mr. Lyons gave occasional recitals at the Y where he served as a volunteer worker. Under proper sponsorship, Mr. Lyons could have gone far in the concert world. He had all the natural ability.

All he lacked was the opportunity. Unfortunately, the "Sinfionetta" never got off the ground. The WPA big shots did nothing to help Lawrence. They concentrated on the old Lafayette Theater where the Federal Theater had a black com-

The "Sinfionetta" was allowed to die.

But not before it had won appreciation from the



DEAN DIXON

privileged few who heard same wonderful music during the rehearsals, played and sung for the very first time in Harlem.

Today, the climate is far different.

The world is eager to hear this and other creations of black composers. Music itself, has no color. What sets some of it apart is the fact it was written by blacks. This "Festival" offered many striking differences from earlier efforts. This orchestra was not an aggregation of black musicians — only the conductor, Paul Freeman, was black. According to him, no one knows the works of black composers.

That's not the worse according to Mr. Freeman. He says further, their creations have been submerged. In a one-man effort to remedy this, Mr. Freeman has made nine recordings of music by black composers.

His contentions help explain the short shrift given Mr. Lawrence's earlier efforts. That same indifference and coolness forced the late Dean Dixon to leave this country, going to Europe where color was no bar to his talent as a conduc-

No question about it, Lawrence's idea was sound

- that is giving the world an opportunity to hear the great classic musical works of

black composers — and even if it is forty years late, the recent concerts by a world

renown orchestra, prove him correct, and a man ahead of his time.

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