

Analysis of Shirley Graham Du Bois “Lost” Opera: *Tom-Tom*

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Shirley Graham Du Bois lived a long life characterized by incessant activism. All her work as an author and composer is a direct reflection of her unwavering humanitarian values. Known most famously as an author of biographies, Graham's music compositions provide a tangibly emotional depiction of the African-American struggle. Her contributions to the advancement of African-American human rights, music, and literature are unquestionable. However, Graham's legacy, specifically as a composer, has unjustly suffered due to a number of factors. Tracking her life, her marriage to prolific sociologist and rights activist William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (W.E.B. Du Bois) seems to be a singularity which changed her life forever. Following their marriage in July of 1951, there is no evidence of Graham composing any new music. The lack of recorded information on Graham is an ironic reoccurring theme, given how thoroughly documented her husband's life is. Her opera, *Tom-tom*, thought to be lost to history, was rediscovered in a collection of Graham's papers purchased by Harvard University in 2001. These manuscripts are now the earliest work we have of Graham's, providing invaluable information on her voice from the beginning of her career. The opera, in its premiere performance in Cleveland, Ohio, is said to have featured an all-black cast and orchestra with a total number of attendees in the tens of thousands.¹ The music itself is full of traditional tonality, modal inflections, "Jazz" colorations, African folk idioms, and of course leitmotif. Graham's opera fits perfectly with the conservative post-romantic musical style at the turn of the 20th century, similar to composers such as Margaret Bonds or Florence Price. To no fault of her own, Graham has been disregarded as a women composer of color, when she is clearly deserving of a place in the operatic canon.

Shirley Graham was born to a religious family in Indianapolis, Indiana, on November 11th, 1896. Her father, David A. Graham, was an African Methodist Episcopal minister, and her

¹ Caramor, "Listening To Tom-Tom by Shirley Graham Du Bois | Full Concert & Conversation." July 9, 2021.

mother, Etta Bell Graham, was an activist within the church. From a very young age, she was taught to always stand up to discrimination and injustice. She had her first publication in the editorial section of an Indianapolis newspaper protesting racial discrimination when she was only thirteen, after she was denied access to a YWCA swimming pool.² Graham moved a number of times across the country early in her life following her father's work. When the Grahams were living in Seattle, Washington, Shirley met and married her first husband, Shadrach McCants, when she was twenty-one. She had two sons with McCants, Robert in 1923 and David in 1925, and they unfortunately divorced in 1927.³ After the birth of her second son, Graham briefly attended the prestigious Sorbonne in France, formerly known as the University of Paris, to study music composition. It is unknown who she studied composition with, or if her children made the journey to Europe with her. Returning to the United States in 1929, Graham served as a music librarian at Howard University in Washington, D.C. and a music teacher at Morgan College in Maryland. Deciding to continue her studies in composition, Graham enrolled at Oberlin Conservatory where she would earn both a Bachelor's and Master's degree in music.⁴ Her Master's thesis, "The Survival of Africanisms in Modern Music," clearly shows her creative and scholarly interests at this point in her life. Graham would only briefly make use of her music degrees with the Federal Theatre Project until funding was pulled under racial prejudice. Her political affiliations and race continued to limit her creative opportunities throughout her life. In 1941, Graham joined the American Communist Party and the Sojourners for Truth and Justice. Following her marriage to W.E.B. Du Bois, her reputation as a playwright began to transform

² University of Massachusetts Amherst Office of Equity and Inclusion. "Shirley Graham Du Bois." President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2023.

³ Harvard Radcliffe Institute for advanced Study. "Shirley Graham Du Bois." W.E.B. Du Bois Center, 2001.

⁴ Schmalenberger, Sarah. "Debuting Her Political Voice: The Lost Opera of Shirley Graham." *Black Music Research Journal* 26, no. 1 (2006): 39–87.

into a biographer and famous spouse. Their joint passion for humanitarianism changed the world in the 20th century, but unfortunately at the cost of Graham's creative work.

Shirley Graham composed her opera, *Tom-tom*, in 1932 early in her studies at Oberlin. *Tom-tom* is the earliest composition that we can catalogue within Graham's body of work, but it is undoubtable that she composed music before *Tom-tom* to attend Sorbonne and to be admitted to Oberlin. Hopefully, one day those earlier compositions will also be rediscovered. Shirley Graham was commissioned by the Cleveland Metropolitan Opera Company to write a "distinctly black" opera for their 1932 summer season. *Tom-tom* was the result, and like all of her other work in music and literature, it uplifts African-American idioms and Pan-African narratives. Pan-Africanism, a term pioneered by her second husband W.E.B. Du Bois, is the belief that all people of African descent had common interests and should work together in the struggle for their freedom. The formal structure of the opera follows a Pan-African narrative with an all-black cast and orchestra in three acts. Act one takes place in indigenous Africa, following a tribe as they are abducted by slavers. Act two takes place on an American slave plantation, and the final Act makes a deceiving escape to 1920s Harlem in New York City, only to be greeted with the same struggles in a modern environment.

For nearly seventy years, the details of the premier of *Tom-tom* were thought to be lost to history. In 2001, the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at Harvard University acquired a massive collection of Shirley Graham Du Bois' belongings.⁵ Within the collection are the manuscripts to *Tom-tom*, although they are incomplete and damaged. Despite the weathered pages and fading handwriting, an incredible amount of

⁵ Du Bois, Shirley Graham, 1896-1977. Papers, 1865-1998 (inclusive), 1905-1975 (bulk). Work and Writings. Musical Scores. "Tom-Tom," Overture - Act III, folders 24f.1-24f.22. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

information can be found within the score. The music is full of intense text painting and visceral imagery, featuring whips, chains, a full orchestra of winds and strings, an orchestra of African tom-toms, a choir, and a pipe organ. There is no published full score, so orchestration information is limited to short-score reductions. The manuscripts show a maximum of six voices at any given moment, and important orchestrations are clearly notated throughout. It is impossible to know what the premiere sounded like with complete accuracy, but we can glean how Graham constructed material harmonically, rhythmically, and lyrically.

Figure 1 is the very first document from Graham's papers. This excerpt is labeled "Overture," assumably the very first music Graham imagined starting the three Act epic. The first eleven bars features the massive Tom-tom section, scaffolding a rhythmic swell. The Bassoon, Viola, and Oboe create melodic interest over an E pedal in the Timpani and Cello, ending with some ambiguous whole-tone passages. Those melodies resolve to an enharmonically spelled V chord in the key of A major, which resolves into the beginning of the overture theme stated by the Horns. These beginning two systems alone feature many of the techniques Graham enjoys using in her music. The marching rhythms in the tom-toms return in all three acts as a leitmotif, musically connecting to the Pan-African narrative. Graham's harmonic language strikes an interesting balance of tonality and modality, and the introduction to the overture is a perfect example as to how she connects the two sound worlds. The romantic brass and string overture theme in A major shows Grahams appeal to tradition tonal structures. At the "strings alone" marking, we can see how she develops this tonal space by going to the parallel minor. A chromatic descent in the bass follows smooth voice leading, going from G# dominant 7, to C major over G natural, climaxing in a very dissonant polychord, C/E, clashing G# in the cellos to

FIGURE 1: "Overture" from *Tom-Tom* by Shirley Graham Du Bois⁶

Overture

Handwritten musical score for "Overture" from *Tom-Tom* by Shirley Graham Du Bois. The score is written on 18 staves and includes parts for Bassoon, Violin, Viola, Trumpet, Trombone, 2 Clarinets, and Piano. The music is in 4/4 time and features a variety of rhythmic patterns and dynamics. Handwritten annotations include "Cello added", "Strings alone", and "Pizz.".

Style No. 5—18 Staves
Printed in the U.S.A.

G. Schirmer, Inc., New York

⁶ Du Bois, Shirley Graham, 1896-1977. Papers, 1865-1998 (inclusive), 1905-1975 (bulk). Work and Writings. Musical Scores. "Tom-Tom," Overture - Act III, folders 24f.1-24f.22. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

G natural in the clarinets. The end of the excerpt moves through different versions of a C# minor 7 chord, characteristically embellished with the occasional 9 or #11.

Figure 2 comes from the second scene of Act I in indigenous Africa. This scene is one of seven scenes which have been recorded in a 2021 video revival produced by Oberlin Conservatory.⁷ Despite the extensive orchestrations, only the reduction for solo voice and piano was recorded. The whole beginning of the scene up to the end of the second system is a rhythmized D half-diminished seventh chord. Graham sets the text starting on the root of the chord, D, emphasizing the minor 3rd relationship to F. Graham's constant use of seventh chords and rocking minor 3rd motion throughout the entire opera is reminiscent of jazz idioms, specifically the blues. Starting at measure 96 in the third and fourth system, a chordal 6th is added to the sonority of a minor seven chord, contrasting the various diminished qualities preceding it. These jazz idioms are mixed with operatic leitmotif very effectively. Percussive interjections imitating the tom-tom rhythms underscore the entire scene, creating poetic tension between the staging, text, and music.

Figure 3 is an excerpt from the second act, featuring a powerful pan-diatonic moment when the "Voodoo Man" character performs a religious ritual. His chant arpeggiates an A minor triad, until the C is raised to a C# on the text "gods." The orchestration below the text is a massive, sweeping voicing of another diminished seventh chord with an F# root. An F pedal an octave below the bass, presumably natural, creates even more added dissonance. This is yet another example of how Graham fits within the post-romantic conservative style, rooted in formal tonal structures. The last two systems of figure 3 feature another return of the tom-tom rhythmic leitmotif paired with more "bluesy" minor 3rd lyric setting. When Graham is not

⁷ Caramor, "Listening To Tom-Tom by Shirley Graham Du Bois | Full Concert & Conversation." July 9, 2021.

FIGURE 2: Act I Scene II from *Tom-Tom* by Shirley Graham Du Bois⁸

Act I Scene II

Small circle of light
Slow [185]

Leader to Boy

List-en to the dis-tant Tom Toms, And

xyl.

cello + Bass with back of bow

B.D.

8. 12

B.D.

[190]

an-swer quick-ly when they call you Beat more loud-ly on your Tom Tom And

hee!

[195]

tell us if there's dan-ger near! Like a pan-ther eyes a-blaz-ing

cym.

cym.

Guard the vil-lage! Might-y black men strong and war like sneak up-on us thru the dark-ness

cym.

⁸ Du Bois, Shirley Graham, 1896-1977. Papers, 1865-1998 (inclusive), 1905-1975 (bulk). Work and Writings. Musical Scores. "Tom-Tom," Overture - Act III, folders 24f.1-24f.22. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

FIGURE 3: Excerpt from Act II of *Tom-Tom* by Shirley Graham Du Bois⁹

Act II

16

Voodoo

♩ Great god of the Tom Tom, To do thy bidding, All other gods do

Male. Chorus + Strings

150

cello) Bass) sust.

Voodoo

run.— What is this light? What is this light? *ff* *p* so

Orch.

Voodoo

calm so peace-ful and so still! Not for me!

160

Tom Tom beat-ing Some-where in the vast-ness of the jun-gle,

165

⁹ Du Bois, Shirley Graham, 1896-1977. Papers, 1865-1998 (inclusive), 1905-1975 (bulk). Work and Writings. Musical Scores. "Tom-Tom," Overture - Act III, folders 24f.1-24f.22. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

functionally writing recitative, her text setting can be rather intense, as can be seen in the third system of figure 3 with the parallel tritones on “Not for me!”

We can see alternative approaches Graham has taken to text-setting in Act II scene I (figures 4 and 5). Before the introduction of text on the second page, Graham creates an eerie soundscape of slaves on an American plantation. Set in the key of F minor, a slow and ominous roll in timpani is paired with chromaticism in the basses and pads of superimposed C minor triads. Literal chains and whips are notated, adding to the poignant imagery of the scene and reminding the audience exactly where the characters are. Measures 18 and 19 are literal orchestrations of lashings. A quick descending F harmonic minor scale ends with the accented crack of a whip, not once but twice. To transition the audience and the vocalists into the next section, Graham demonstrates another functional use of chromatic seventh chords. In the last system of figure 4, an A# diminished seven chord is voiced with the chordal 7th, G natural, in the bass. Moving chromatically by step in the soprano voice, Graham cycles through different diminished seventh chord inversions to eventually land on a G dominant 7 chord, the V in the key of C minor. The specific voicing of seventh chords moving chromatically is clearly reminiscent of jazz piano writing in this section, only Graham very rarely uses extensions. At the top of the page in figure 5, there is yet another use of the descending blue minor 3rd in the voice. This time the voice is adding an agogic accent set the text “darkness,” as opposed to oscillating the same minor 3rd from the blues scale. The sustained pitch is paired with the C minor pad voiced an octave lower in the trombones. Graham sets the text “light” later in this example to a minor triad with a flourishing triplet gesture in the upper voices, directly contrasting the darker, more elongated setting of “darkness.” Act II Scene I demonstrates the unapologetic emotion that Graham includes in her work. There is no recording of this except, but the score is painfully loud.

FIGURE 4: Page 1 of Act II Scene I of *Tom-Tom* by Shirley Graham Du Bois¹⁰

Tom Tom Act II
Scene I

Shirley Graham
37

Slow

ppp

Timp.

chains

5

Bsn.

10

whip

pp

15

whip

20

whip

Rit.

25

tpt.

30

chains

No. 3.—Carl Fischer, New York.

¹⁰ Du Bois, Shirley Graham, 1896-1977. Papers, 1865-1998 (inclusive), 1905-1975 (bulk). Work and Writings. Musical Scores. "Tom-Tom," Overture - Act III, folders 24f.1-24f.22. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

FIGURE 5: Page 2 of Act II Scene I of *Tom-Tom* by Shirley Graham Du Bois¹¹

Act II 38

Boy *f* Dark- ness *f* Dark- ness *p* Is there no

Trm. *f* 35

Boy Light for us in all the world? Great are the ter-rors of dark- ness

40

Boy Each heart a-lone in dis- pair — No light to guide, No ~~light~~ to lead, hand

45

Boy Crushed with the fear of the dark! *f* Give us Light! Give us

f *molto*

No. 3.—Carl Fischer, New York.

¹¹ Du Bois, Shirley Graham, 1896-1977. Papers, 1865-1998 (inclusive), 1905-1975 (bulk). Work and Writings. Musical Scores. "Tom-Tom," Overture - Act III, folders 24f.1-24f.22. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

Like many other African-American composers at the turn of the century (Margaret Bonds, William Grant Still, Florence Price), Graham merges African-American musical idioms with more conservative “classical” idioms to uplift Pan-African narratives. Specifically in the realm of opera, *Tom-tom* marks a distinct advancement in the legacy of African American music. The content of the opera is full of intensity of emotion, uplifting voices which have historically and systematically been suppressed. It is hard to say what influenced Graham’s departure from music to focus on literature. Graham received a significant amount of recognition for her work as an author, but it seems she struggled to receive the same kind of reception as a composer. Her music is no less significant than her contemporaries, so how can we explain the current state of her manuscripts? Graham’s work and reputation deems her disserving of a place in the operatic canon, but for whatever reason, her reputation as a composer has almost vanished over the years. Given the current state of the world, it would be a noble cause to try and reconstruct the opera as it was premiered in 1932. A revival could bring recognition back to Graham, counteracting the cycle of racism and misogyny women of color have experience for all of history.

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