

# Introduction

Clarence Cameron White, black violinist, composer, and teacher, was born on 10 August 1880 in Clarkesville, Tennessee to James William and Jennie White (later Jennie Conner). White grew up in Oberlin, Ohio and Washington, D.C., where he attended Howard University. After graduating from the Oberlin Conservatory at Oberlin College in 1903, White went to Washington, D.C. to become director of the String Department of the newly formed Washington Conservatory of Music. He married Beatrice Louise Warrick, a pianist, on 31 December 1904; they had two sons, William and Clarence.

For the next forty years, White continued to teach, study, perform, and compose. From 1908 to 1910 he lived in London, studying violin with the Russian violinist, Michael Zacharewitsch, and composition with the black English composer, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. While living in England, he also served as first violinist in the String Player's Club of Croyden, conducted by Coleridge-Taylor. After returning from England in 1910, White moved to Boston where he opened a private violin studio. He remained there until 1922 when over-exhaustion caused him to spend a year recuperating in Oberlin.

In 1924, White was named head of the Music Department of West Virginia State College, Institute, West Virginia. He held that post until 1930 when a grant from the Julius Rosenwald Foundation enabled him to spend two years in Paris. There he studied under the French composer, Raoul Laparra, and worked on his Haitian opera, "Ouanga"! for which he won the 1932 David Bispham Medal, awarded annually by the American Opera Society of Chicago for the best operatic work by an American.

"Ouanga"!, meaning "voodoo charm" or "voodoo spell," is based on the violent life of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the slave who led his people in revolt and became Emperor of Haiti in the beginning of the nineteenth century. The libretto for "Ouanga"! was written by John Frederick Matheus, Professor of Romance Languages at West Virginia State College. White and Matheus had gone to Haiti during the summer of 1928 to study native music and folklore. Their collaboration resulted also in "Tambour" (1929), a two-act play with incidental music by White and "Cocomacque," an early version of "Ouanga"!

In 1932, White became director of the School of Music at Hampton Institute in Virginia, a position he held until around 1934. From 1937 to 1942, he travelled around the country, organizing community music groups for the National Recreation Association.

Beatrice White died in the early 1940s. In 1943, White married Pura Belpré, children's author and librarian with The New York Public Library. From then until his death on 2 July 1960, White lived in New York City. For a short time he continued to give concerts and teach violin. He later retired to devote full time to composition.

During his career, White composed a great variety of music. Many of his compositions, including "Bandanna Sketches," were based on black spirituals. He also wrote a number of classical pieces, such as a violin concerto in E minor and a symphony in D minor for cello and piano. A nine and one-half minute musical selection entitled "Elegy," written in 1954, won the 1953–1954 Benjamin Award for Tranquil Music. A later composition, "Heritage," consisted of a cantata set to the poetry of Countee Cullen.

White's work was published largely by the Carl Fischer Company and was played by many musicians of note, such as Fritz Kreisler and Albert Spaulding. White received several other

awards and honorary degrees, including the Harmon Foundation Medal and Award for distinguished service to music (1927), an honorary Master of Arts degree from Atlanta University (1929), and an honorary Doctor of Music degree from Wilberforce University (1933).