

# SANCTUARY ROAD

## ORATORIO IN TWO ACTS

Based on *The Underground Railroad*

A book by William Still

Libretto by Mark Campbell

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**A Study Guide prepared by Virginia Opera**



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# **SANCTUARY ROAD**

**Premiere**

First performance on May 7, 2018 at Carnegie Hall in New York City.

## **Cast of Characters**

**William Still**  
**Clarissa Davis**  
**Harriet Eglan**  
**Ellen Craft**  
**Charlotte Giles**  
**Wesley Harris**  
**Henry “Box” Brown**  
**Peter Still**  
**Chorus**

Baritone  
Soprano  
Soprano  
Mezzo-soprano  
Mezzo-soprano  
Tenor  
Baritone  
Baritone



**2023-2024 Season**

## Brief Summary

**William Still**, a conductor on the Underground Railroad, stresses the importance of documenting the history of the Railroad. Still conducts interviews with other enslaved persons about their experiences. These experiences are re-enacted over the course of the oratorio. The finale contains excerpts from letters written to Still from former Railroad passengers who are now emancipated.

No. 1, Write: William Still stresses the importance of documenting this history of the Underground Railroad and the experiences of its participants.

No. 2, Quietly: Enslaved persons pray for freedom.

No. 3, Reward!: Enslavers issue wanted posters for the freedom-seekers.

No. 4, The Same Train: **Ellen Craft** escapes enslavement by disguising herself as a sickly, elderly white man.

No. 5, Interview I: Still interviews an enslaved person.

No. 6, Run I: **Wesley Harris** escapes enslavement while running from enslavers with guns.

No. 7, This Side Up: **Henry “Box” Brown** escapes enslavement by mailing himself to Philadelphia.

No. 8, I Waited: The chorus sings Psalm 40 which Brown allegedly recited when he emerged from his shipping crate.

No. 9, Run II: A continuation of Harris’s escape account.

No. 10, Interview II: Still continues to interview enslaved persons.

No. 11, Aunt Abigail: **Harriet Eglan** and **Charlotte Giles** escape enslavement by pretending to attend the funeral of their fictional family member, Aunt Abigail.

No. 12, Run III: A continuation of Harris’s escape account.

No. 13, Interview III: Still meets his brother, **Peter Still**, after forty-two years of estrangement.

No. 14, Rain: **Clarissa Davis** prays for rain so that she can escape enslavement unseen.

No. 15, Interlude (1861-1865): The voices of fallen soldiers from the Civil War.

No. 16, Finale: Still recovers the records of the Underground Railroad that he kept hidden during the Civil War. Still hears excerpts from letters written to him from newly-emancipated persons.

## About the composer

Paul Moravec (b. 1957) is an American composer born in Buffalo, New York. He is also a Professor of Music at Adelphi University in Long Island, New York and teaches composition at the The New School in New York. He graduated with a B.A. in composition from Harvard University in 1980. Upon graduating, he won the Prix de Rome and studied at the American Academy in Rome. He received his Master of Music (1982) and Doctor of Musical Arts (1987), both in composition, from Columbia University.

In 2004 Moravec won the Pulitzer Prize for Music for his chamber work, *Tempest Fantasy*. He has composed numerous other chamber, orchestral, opera, and choral works. In addition to the Pulitzer Prize, Moravec has also earned other prestigious awards including: the Rome Prize Fellowship, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Rockefeller Foundation.

Moravec is frequently commissioned by major music institutions. His recent premieres include: *A Nation of Others* with the Oratorio Society of New York (OSNY) at Carnegie Hall, *The Shining* at Minnesota Opera, based on the Stephen King novel, and the premiere of *Sanctuary Road* with OSNY at Carnegie Hall. Other recent premieres include: the song cycle *Tell All the Truth* and *Light Shall Lift Us*, an online Opera America anthem for 100+ opera soloists and virtual orchestra.

## About William Still

William Still (1821-1902), was born in Burlington County, New Jersey to parents, Sidney (later Charity) and Levin Still. William was the youngest of eighteen children. Levin purchased his freedom from his enslaver in Maryland in 1798. He then moved to New Jersey. After two attempts, Charity escaped enslavement in Maryland and joined her husband in New Jersey. She left behind her two oldest sons, Peter and Levin Jr. in Maryland. William and his other siblings who were born in New Jersey were born both free and enslaved. Under New Jersey law, William was free. Under federal law, William was enslaved because his mother was self-emancipated. Peter and Levin Jr. remained enslaved in Maryland until they were sold to enslavers in Kentucky and Alabama. Though Levin Jr. was killed by his enslaver in 1831, Peter was able to purchase his freedom in 1850. He reunited with his family in 1854 and lived out the remainder of his life with them in New Jersey.

In 1844 William moved to Philadelphia. In 1847 he was hired as a clerk for the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery. That same year, he married Letitia George with whom he had four children. William and Letitia's oldest daughter, Caroline Virginia Matilda Still, was one of the first Black women to become a medical doctor in the United States. She operated a private medical practice in Philadelphia. During William's time in Philadelphia, he became an active conductor on the Underground Railroad, helping freedom-seekers to reach Philadelphia. The work of William and his fellow agents of the Underground Railroad became more difficult with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. This Act required that enslaved persons be returned to their enslavers even if they were living in a free state. After Congress passed this Act, William was appointed chairman of the Vigilance Committee in Philadelphia. This committee was organized and run by abolitionists to protect freedom-seekers from capture. These committee members also helped run the Underground Railroad. In total, William helped free nearly 800 enslaved persons.

William also used the power of the written word to fight for the freedom and equal treatment of Black people in the United States. In 1859 he wrote a letter to the press that protested the racism that Black people experienced on Philadelphia streetcars. In 1867, he published *A Brief Narrative of the Struggle for the Rights of Colored People of Philadelphia in the City Railway Cars* and read it at a public meeting in what is now the Pennsylvania Statehouse in Philadelphia. He published *The Underground Railroad* in 1872, the book on which *Sanctuary Road* is based. This book is the only written first-hand account by a Black person of the activities of the Underground Railroad. The book contains interviews that William conducted with formerly enslaved persons, accounts of William's own experiences with the Underground Railroad, and other records related to the Underground Railroad that William meticulously kept. A champion of universal suffrage, William also published *An Address on Voting and Laboring* in 1874 in which he outlined his own political views. He also encouraged Black people to participate in politics and vote.

William also used his organizational and record-keeping skills to provide educational and financial infrastructure for Black Americans. He helped provide provisions for soldiers at Camp William Penn, a Union soldier camp in Pennsylvania. Camp William Penn was the first Union camp dedicated to training Black soldiers. With the Berean Presbyterian Church, William opened a Mission School in Philadelphia to promote literacy among emancipated Black Americans. He also helped establish the first YMCA for Black Americans in Philadelphia, which was crucial in helping Black children access educational resources. William assisted in managing orphanages for Black children whose parents died in the Civil War. William's activities show that he not only was invested in the freedom of Black Americans, but that he also wanted to provide access to the tools that Black Americans would need to build their lives after gaining their freedom.

## **About the Cast – Drawn from Accounts in William Still’s *Underground Railroad***

Clarissa Davis fled from Portsmouth, Virginia in 1854 at the age of 22. Clarissa received word that the steamship, the *City of Richmond*, was set to arrive in Portsmouth and that one of the crew members was willing to hide her in a cargo crate on the ship. She prayed for rain so that the police officers would be driven off street patrol, making it easier for her to sneak onto the ship. Rain came down in sheets before dawn and Clarissa, wearing men’s clothes, was able to sneak onto the ship with the help of a crewmember, William Bagnal. She was delivered to the Vigilance Committee in Philadelphia. The Committee recommended that she change her name in order to make it harder for her former enslavers to find her. She changed her name to Mary D. Armstead and received her Underground Railroad passport. With her passport and the assistance of the Railroad conductors, she was able to travel to New Bedford, Massachusetts and reunite with her siblings who also escaped enslavement.

Harriet Eglan and Charlotte Giles fled from Baltimore, Maryland in 1856. They dressed in thick, black mourning clothes to prevent recognition and boarded a train to Philadelphia. Before the train departed, their enslaver boarded the train in search of Harriet and Charlotte. He approached Harriet and Charlotte and asked their names. Charlotte said her name was Mary and Harriet said her name was Lizzie. Believing that these women were not Harriet and Charlotte, their enslaver left the train and the two arrived safely in Philadelphia.

Ellen Craft fled Macon, Georgia in 1848 with her husband, William Craft. Ellen was mixed-race and had fair skin. She and her husband concocted a plan in which Ellen would pose as a white man and her husband would pose as her servant. She sewed herself some fashionable men’s clothing and cut her hair to her shoulders. However, Ellen feared that, without a beard, her feminine features would give her away. Ellen and William decided to wrap part of her face in bandages to remedy this – William would tell others that she was suffering from a toothache. The bandages on her face also muffled her voice which made disguising her feminine voice easier. Planning further, Ellen and William realized that they would have to stay in hotels during their long trip from Macon to Philadelphia. Doing so would require Ellen to sign a registry at these hotels which could give them away. Ellen and William decided then that Ellen would also feign a few other frailties so that William could perform all of her duties for her and lessen the risk of getting caught. It was common for men of a high class (which Ellen was pretending to be a part of) to depend wholly on their servants for even the smallest tasks. Ellen put her arm in a sling so she would not be required to write and donned thick glasses so that she could pretend not to see very well. She also pretended to be hard of hearing so that few people would try to engage with her in conversation. Ellen and William successfully traveled by train to Savannah, Georgia; Charleston, South Carolina; Richmond, Virginia, and Baltimore, Maryland before making it to Philadelphia. During their travels, they stayed in luxurious hotel accommodations befitting Ellen’s perceived class, race, and gender. With the assistance of the Underground Railroad, Ellen and William sought permanent residence in Boston, Massachusetts. Ellen and William married again in Boston to celebrate their freedom. Unfortunately, in 1850 Ellen and William’s

enslavers from Georgia arrived in Boston, looking to capture the couple. They sought asylum in the home of George and Susan Hilliard, a pair of abolitionists who often sheltered freedom-seekers like the Crafts. The Hilliards were successful in keeping the Crafts safe and the enslavers returned to Georgia. The Underground Railroad then provided the Crafts with clothing and tickets to board a ship to England because the United States was deemed unsafe for them. The Crafts lived in England for a few years and had a family before returning to the United States after the end of the Civil War. The Crafts bought a plot of land in Georgia and remained there.

Wesley Harris fled from Martinsburg, Virginia (now West Virginia) in 1853 when he was 22 years old. With two other enslaved men, Harris left Martinsburg on foot to Terrytown, Maryland – a distance of roughly 44 miles. A Black man living in Terrytown warned Harris and the others that the town was unkind toward Black people and they should go into hiding immediately. Harris and the others hid in the woods but they were found when a farmer's dog began barking at them. The farmer asked where they were going. Harris said they were going to visit relatives in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. They trusted the farmer because they thought he may be a Quaker and Quakers were prohibited from enslaving people due to their religious beliefs. The farmer warned them of the danger and convinced the men to take shelter in his barn. The farmer and his family fed Harris and the others and instructed them to stay the night and he would direct them to Gettysburg in the morning. Harris could not sleep because he was suspicious that the farmer would betray them. The next day eight armed men entered the barn and found Harris and his companions. When the men learned that Harris and the others didn't have passes allowing the trip to Gettysburg, they insisted that Harris and the others consent to being tied up so that they could be taken to the local magistrate. Harris declared that the men would not take him alive. One of Harris's companions shot the farmer who betrayed them and a shoot-out ensued. Harris and his companions were all badly injured during the fight and were captured and imprisoned at a tavern. Harris remained imprisoned for a few weeks while his wounds healed. While imprisoned, Harris plotted his escape, asking a friend of his to bring him a rope. With the use of the rope and a few nails that Harris had found, he was able to escape the tavern from a window and meet his friend, nearly a mile away from the tavern. Harris stayed under the guardianship of his friend while a man named James George procured a horse for Harris. Harris rode the horse to Gettysburg, making sure to take an indirect route in order to lose his pursuers. Upon arrival in Gettysburg, the Underground Railroad provided Harris with clothing and medical care. The Railroad also gave him a ticket to Canada where he later became a naturalized citizen.

Henry "Box" Brown fled Richmond, Virginia in 1849 at age 33. With the help of James C. A. Smith and a shoemaker named Samuel A. Smith, Brown ordered a box to be made of his own design. The box was 2 feet wide, 3 feet long, and nearly 3 feet deep. He also requested that the box be lined with baize, the green felt-like material found on pool tables. He planned to ship himself in this box to Philadelphia via the Adams Express Company. Brown brought with him a small canteen of water and dried biscuits. The box had one single hole for air and was nailed shut and bound with straps. Samuel A. Smith mailed the box to a shoe dealer, William H. Johnson, in Philadelphia. He was in the box for 26 hours between Richmond and Philadelphia. At different times Brown was upside down or roughly jostled around in the box as different

delivery personnel handled the box along the route. The Vigilance Committee in Philadelphia knew about Brown's plan and were concerned about how they were going to get Brown's crate to the Anti-Slavery Office without arousing suspicion. The Committee was also worried that Brown had died during his journey. Mr. McKim, one of the Committee members, arranged for one of his friends, Mr. Davis, to arrange that the crate be brought to the Anti-Slavery Office. Mr. Davis frequently worked with the Adams Express Company and Mr. McKim was confident that Mr. Davis making a special request would not arouse suspicion. Mr. Davis paid a trusted Adams Express Company employee \$5 to deliver the box directly to the Anti-Slavery Office. When Brown's box arrived at the Anti-Slavery Office, a few men gathered around the box, uncertain what they would find inside. Mr. McKim knocked on the lid of the box and asked, "all right?" Brown replied, "all right, sir!" After the men had sawed open the box, Brown sprang out and asked, "How do you do, gentlemen?" The witnesses said he was soaked. Brown sang Psalm 40 in celebration of his safe arrival. Mr. Davis gave Brown a place to stay for a few days while the Railroad organized his next steps. With the assistance of the Railroad, Brown left Philadelphia for Boston.

## Historical Background

Moravec initially wrote *Sanctuary Road* as an oratorio in 2017. In 2022, Moravec and his librettist, Mark Campbell, added extra scenes in order to allow *Sanctuary Road* to be performed as an opera. Director Dennis Whitehead also helped construct these new scenes. The oratorio version was commissioned by the New York Oratorio Society and premiered at Carnegie Hall in New York on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018. The North Carolina Opera premiered the opera version of *Sanctuary Road* on March 6<sup>th</sup> 2022 in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Moravec gives Campbell credit for the idea to focus on William Still as the subject for *Sanctuary Road*. The two had previously written a commission based on Stephen King's novel of the same name, *The Shining*, for Minnesota Opera in 2016. While Moravec was excited to write an oratorio on such an important enterprise in American history, he also was aware of the optics of two white men writing a work on such a topic.

Moravec and Campbell decided that the best way to approach writing *Sanctuary Road* was to focus on the biography of Still and the accounts he recorded in *Underground Railroad* rather than to write about enslavement itself. This approach prioritizes first-hand accounts of the experiences of Black Americans on the Underground Railroad. The name *Sanctuary Road* is derived from the term, "sanctuary city." These cities across the United States exercise their municipal rights to limit their cooperation with federal immigration laws in order to provide a safe place, or sanctuary, to those seeking asylum in the United States. Moravec and Campbell agreed that contemporary sanctuary cities are evocative of the cities, churches, private homes, and other locations that provided sanctuary to passengers on the Underground Railroad in spite of federal laws that required citizens to return freedom-seekers to their enslavers.

In an interview with Julie Amacher on Minnesota Public Radio, soprano Laquita Mitchell, who sang the roles of Clarissa Davis and Harriet Eglan, says that she is thankful to have participated in this work. "When I listen to the finale, and I realize that the words I'm singing are the actual words that were written to William Still, thanking him for what he had done, it brings me to tears to know that these people risked everything to be free."

## A Snapshot of the Local History of the Underground Railroad

Local historian, Dr. Cassandra Newby-Alexander of Norfolk State University, has done extensive research on the local history of the Underground Railroad, of the slave trade, and of the history and legacy of free Black people in the Tidewater region. Her most recent book, *Virginia Waterways and the Underground Railroad*, chronicles the ways in which enslaved Virginians used the local waterways to escape enslavement.

In 2019, builders found a tunnel underneath the Basilica of Saint Mary of the Immaculate Conception in downtown Norfolk. Newby-Alexander confirmed that this tunnel could indeed have been a part of the Underground Railroad. She noted that the concrete laid over the tunnel in 1858 was not done according to code which suggests that those who worked on the building knew that the tunnel was there and wanted to make sure it was protected. Newby-Alexander said the tunnel could have been a place for freedom-seekers to hide while waiting for confirmation that it was safe to continue to their destination, likely a ship headed north.

Churches were often stops on the Underground Railroad, and the Hampton Roads area is no exception. The Emanuel AME Church in Portsmouth likely hid freedom-seeking enslaved persons in the attic, the basement, and even behind the organ. Much like the local waterways, churches often provided temporary shelter until freedom-seekers could be sure that it was relatively safe to continue on their journey north.

Though it is important to commemorate the successes of the Underground Railroad, it is also necessary to acknowledge why Portsmouth and Norfolk were such busy nodes on the Railroad. It is a common assumption that enslavement was primarily a rural enterprise, but urban enslavement in major cities like Portsmouth and Norfolk (as well as Richmond) was also very common. Enslaved persons were forced to work in city homes and businesses. At times, they were also temporarily leased out to other enslavers in more rural areas. This means that both Portsmouth and Norfolk themselves were epicenters of the regional slave trade among North Carolina, Maryland, and Virginia. Because of the prevalence of enslavement in this area, the Underground Railroad was consequently active in this area. On the other hand, the prevalence of the slave trade here along with the movement of urban enslaved persons between urban and rural areas gave enslaved persons extensive knowledge of regional waterways, roads, train schedules, and ship schedules. Enslaved persons were able to work together and use this knowledge to help create maps for the Underground Railroad.

For more information on Dr. Newby-Alexander's work, you can find one of her projects for free online. The Sold Down River project works with local universities and libraries to trace the domestic slave trade. In Richmond, the Library of Virginia and the Virginia Museum of History and Culture have pooled their resources for a project called "Virginia Untold." This project, also available online, provides access to records about free and enslaved Black and multiracial people from roughly 1600s-1860s. William Still's book, *Underground Railroad*, is also available for free online via Project Gutenberg.

## What is an oratorio?

An oratorio is a piece of choral music that features soloists, a narrator, and a small orchestra. Like opera, it tells a story with music. Unlike opera, oratorios do not usually have costumes, a set, or scenery. You can still see oratorios at churches, particularly around Christmastime. G.F. Handel's 1741 oratorio, *Messiah*, is a frequent fixture on church music programs during the Christmas season.

Handel is also responsible for the creation of oratorios. Though he was German-born, Handel (1685-1759) spent much of his career in London and became a naturalized British citizen in 1727. At this time in Europe, composers often had trouble making a consistent income. Because copyright laws did not yet exist, composers were not paid a fee (or a royalty) when someone performed their music. Worse yet, anyone could copy their music and pass it off as their own! Therefore, even if a piece was popular, composers like Handel would not make extra money from the performances. Composers, therefore, made most of their money in two ways. First, they received commissions which means that their employer (usually a member of the monarchy or a clergy member) would pay them a one-time fee to write a piece of music. Second, composers often performed as musicians to supplement the income they received from commissions. Composers also often worked as orchestra directors or music tutors.

Because composers like Handel depended on commissions and performance opportunities for a large portion of their income, the Lent season was a difficult time. The monarchy and the Church of England were closely intertwined – the King and Queen were heads of the Church of England (as they are still today). This meant that neither clergy members nor monarchy members would commission works during the Lenten season because this time was intended for religious reflection. Lent commemorates the forty days that Jesus spent fasting while stranded in the desert while enduring temptation by Satan. To commemorate this event, observing Christians abstain from certain foods as well as certain enjoyments for forty days in order to focus on Jesus's strength and sacrifice. At the end of forty days, Easter celebrates Jesus's resurrection. Music was, in part, restricted during the Lenten season in England in the eighteenth century. In favor of religious observance, large-scale orchestral works, plays, operas, and the like were not performed or commissioned during Lent. Audiences, however, could attend music performed at church since this music was religious in nature. To make up for the loss of income incurred by the Lenten season, Handel devised the oratorio. He wrote these choral works on religious subjects so that they could be performed during Lent. He wrote a total of twenty-nine oratorios over the course of his career.

Though oratorios are no longer only on religious topics and, in Europe and elsewhere, people are now permitted to attend operas and other large-scale entertainment events during the Lenten season, oratorios are still a powerful medium. American composer Julia Wolfe's 2014 oratorio, *Anthracite Fields*, voices the history of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Coal Region. The work commemorates the workers who died in the coal mines and the work they did to fight for fair labor conditions. Sri Lankan composer Dinesh Subasinghe's 2010 oratorio, *Karuna Nadee* (*River of Kindness*) is based on the life of Buddha. The continued vibrancy of oratorios indicate that music is able to tell important stories, even without costumes and scenery.

## Discussion questions

1. *Sanctuary Road* uses a tool called “cast doubling.” This means that some of the singers in *Sanctuary Road* perform more than one role. Why do you think a composer or casting director might ask an artist to perform more than one role? Explain your answer.
2. Though oratorios have Christian origins, composers have since used oratorios to tell a variety of stories – both religious and secular. Unlike operas, oratorios depend almost entirely on the music to tell a story. Opera also uses musical storytelling but has added elements of costumes, scenery, and dialogue. Do you think that an oratorio is a good choice for telling the stories of these participants in the Underground Railroad? Explain your answer. If you’d like a comparison, American composer Nkeiru Okoye’s 2014 opera, *Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed that Line to Freedom* is also about the Underground Railroad. It’s available to watch on YouTube.
3. In an 1873 letter to a friend, J.W. Jones, William Still wrote: “The heroism and desperate struggles that many of our people endured should be kept green in the memory of this and coming generations.” How can this generation keep such heroism and struggles in mind? Why is it important to do so?
4. The involvement of Indigenous Americans in the Underground Railroad is another aspect of the domestic slave trade that is often overlooked. According to historians Roy E. Finkenbine and Tiya Miles, many of the freedom-seekers who wanted to cross into Canada from the Great Lakes region often had to pass through territory owned by Native peoples, particularly the Iroquois and Shawnees. Many Native people in this area offered shelter to freedom-seekers before escorting them to the United States-Canada border. Keeping Still’s request in mind, research a region, city, or person that has a connection with the Underground Railroad. Write a short summary.
5. Some of the music for *Sanctuary Road* was inspired by spirituals. Spirituals are songs that were written and passed on by enslaved African-Americans. They are often based off of the Christian gospel. Several spirituals were composed here in the Hampton Roads area. One such spiritual, “Go Down Moses” was composed by Reverend Louis Lockwood in Hampton, VA. Listen to this spiritual and listen to others. How do they sound similar to *Sanctuary Road*? How are they different?