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Florence Price and the Politics of Her Existence

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A Journal of Women in Music

Florence Price and the Politics of Her Existence

Samantha Ege



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Platform, opportunity, and time are by no means the only elements that influence the construction of legacies, but to interrogate these man-made constructions is to recognize that they determine not only the trajectories of historical figures in real time but also the extent to which such figures are recognized in the present day—if at all. This is evidenced by the discrepancies in the posthumous visibility of men and women composers. The myth that women did not compose “back then” is perpetuated in the contrasting treatments of legacy, which fail to recognize the historically limited platforms for women composers to elevate their works. The myth obscures how the opportunities for such composers may have varied greatly for different practitioners during their lifetime—opportunities to access these often exclusionary, yet influential spheres, find mobility in such spheres, and act in resistance to stereotyped expectations of gender and race. It both ignores and exemplifies the fact that a woman composer’s time, particularly concerning that which she has committed to the mastery of her craft, receives an (under)valuation that is undoubtedly shaped by the politics of her existence.

On the fifth of July 1943, the American composer Florence Price (1887–1953) wrote to the conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Serge Koussevitzky. She closed her letter with the question, “will you examine one of my scores?”¹ However, the question was not as straightforward as it appeared, for the letter began:

My Dear Dr. Koussevitzky,
To begin with I have two handicaps—those of sex and race. I am a woman; and I have some Negro blood in my veins. Knowing the worst, then, would you be good enough to hold in check the possible inclination to regard a woman’s

composition as long on emotionalism but short on virility and thought content;—until you shall have examined some of my work? As to the handicap of race, may I relieve you by saying that I neither expect nor ask any concession on that score. I should like to be judged on merit alone.²

Price was not simply asking Koussevitzky to examine her scores; she was requesting that he do so without sexist or racist judgment. She recognized that she could not escape the stereotypes of her gender or race, and so she took it upon herself to foreground the politics of her existence—describing herself as a woman with some Negro blood in her veins—and then to consign her handicaps to the background so that her music could take centre stage, as should ideally have been the case. The late Rae Linda Brown puts it succinctly: “Price tackles the issues of gender and race up-front by mentioning, then dismissing them.”³ In doing so, she encourages Koussevitzky to follow suit.

Price’s letter exemplifies the ways in which her desire to elevate her work on a prestigious platform, access this traditionally white male territory, and invest greater time in cultivating her craft was also controlled by what these ideas meant for a woman composer of African descent in early mid-twentieth-century America. Furthermore, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the limitations imposed by prejudicial notions about gender and race have lingered on long after Price’s death in 1953. As William Robin notes in a 2014 *New York Times* article on the role of race in concert music, “the Boston Symphony has yet to play a note of her music.”⁴

The concepts of platform, opportunity, and time can certainly shape much wider discourse

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concerning historical women practitioners, but the discourse becomes even more enriched when it is applied to the complex intersections that constitute a single person's life. In the present article, I focus on certain questions that have surfaced in my research on Price's compositional voice and its place and reception in contemporaneous efforts to create a "national" sound. Key questions include: how did Price negotiate the obstacles of gender and race in her contributions to American music? How did she navigate her way around the hostilities in this territory to find opportunities within it? And how did she cultivate an aesthetic that is distinctly and intrinsically American? The answers to all these questions are entangled with the politics of her existence.

My research has identified four key phases in Price's life, defined by her location, activity, and community. The first includes her early years in Arkansas (1887–1903); the second is marked by her studies at the New England Conservatory of Music (1903–1906); the third follows her return to the South (1907–1927); and the fourth covers the Chicago years (1927–1953). These periods are used to structure a deeper exploration into how the factors of platform, opportunity and time—that are so central to the development of any composer—materialized in the context of Price's life and circumstances.

Early Years in Arkansas (1887–1903)

Florence Beatrice Price, née Smith, was born in Little Rock, Arkansas. Her father, Dr. James H. Smith, was a dentist, and her mother, Florence Irene Gulliver, was an elementary school teacher. They married in 1876 and had three children: Charles, Gertrude, and Florence (the youngest).

Dr. Smith was born in 1843 to free parents in Camden, Delaware. He studied dentistry in Philadelphia and later established his own practice in Chicago during the 1860s. His practice, however, did not survive the Great Chicago Fire, and this prompted him to move to Arkansas. There, his Little Rock practice catered to an affluent and interracial clientele that included the Governor of Arkansas.

Dr. Smith's biography is not representative of most African American lives during this time. In fact, in an era defined by the polarity of black and white, Dr. Smith's position within the black elite of a cultured professional class afforded his family privileges and prospects that would remain out of reach for much of the black population. The Smiths belonged to a sociological minority called the Talented Tenth, a term coined by W. E. B. Du Bois in an eponymous essay that promoted the notion that social change was instigated by the leadership of the few who could apply their privilege and education to the cause of uplifting the race. In his seminal work, Du Bois illuminated his vision for racial uplift and the role to be played by an African American intelligentsia:

Education and work are the levers to uplift a people. Work alone will not do it unless inspired by the right ideals and guided by intelligence. Education must not simply teach work—it must teach Life.

The Talented Tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought among their people.⁵

Contextualizing Price's upbringing in the ideology of the Talented Tenth not only breaks down any misconception of a monolithic African American community but also emphasizes the interplay of intersecting identities within. Price's class privilege, coupled with a notable racial ambiguity, enabled her greater potential for agency compared to poorer African Americans trapped in post-slavery subjugation. Her lighter skin complexion was a product of her mixed ancestry—"French, Indian and Spanish" on her mother's side and "Negro, Indian and English" on her father's side.⁶ Her skin tone, coupled with her extensive education and her mode of speech, granted her the possibility of distancing herself from a black racial identity. Yet, this was not the path she chose. Price embraced all aspects of her heritage; and, as a composer, she cultivated an aesthetic around her belief that "a national music very beautiful and very American can come from the melting pot just as the nation itself has done."⁷ Though Price's circumstances did not offset the gender expectations or racial bias of her milieu, there is no doubt that her familial background helped foster the favourable conditions for her to emerge as the first American woman of African descent to achieve national and international recognition as a composer.

Price's musical education began at the age of three with piano lessons from her mother. Her education extended to the integrated Allison Presbyterian Church in Little Rock, where she regularly heard the sacred works of Johann Sebastian Bach, Felix Mendelssohn and Ralph Vaughan Williams.⁸ Her academic growth outside of music was supported by the instruction of Charlotte Andrews Stephens at the segregated Union School. Stephens was the first African American teacher in Little Rock. Though born into slavery, she recognized that her trajectory had been heavily influenced by what she called the "peculiar privileges" of her upbringing.⁹ Stephens' father, though enslaved, was committed to the task of educating fellow slaves as well as free men and women. Stephens' mother further provided for the family through her laundry business, even during her enslavement. Education and enterprise were certainly characteristic of Stephens' upbringing and the path that followed. Her teaching career spanned seventy years; it began in 1869 when, as a fifteen-year-old, she stepped in to cover the class of her white teacher who was away with sickness. She retired in 1939, by which time she had pursued higher education at Oberlin College, Ohio, taught from elementary to high school level, served as a principal twice, and had a school named in her honour.

Price was one of the many students to benefit from Stephens' passion and dedication. Another student was William Grant Still, a family friend of the Smiths who would go on to be known as the Dean of African American composers

The Politics of Her Existence



A photograph of Florence Price by G. Nelidoff, Rosenthal Archives, Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Reprinted by permission.

Florence Price

AUDITORIUM THEATRE

Thursday Evening, June 15th, 1933 at 8:30 P. M.

Chicago Symphony Orchestra

Frederick A. Stock, Conductor

Roland Hayes, Soloist

OVERTURE—"IN OLD VIRGINIA" POWELL

ARIA—"LE REPOS DE LA SAINTE FAMILLE" BERLIOZ

FROM "L'ENFANCE DU CHRIST"

(First time in Chicago)

SYMPHONY IN E. MINOR FLORENCE PRICE

(First performance)

ARIA—"ON-AWAY, AWAKE BELOVED" .. S. COLERIDGE-TAYLOR

FROM "HIAWATHA"

INTERMISSION

CONCERTINO, for PIANO and ORCHESTRA

..... JOHN ALDEN CARPENTER

ALLEGRO CON MOTO

LENTO GRAZIOSO—ALLEGRO

(MISS MARGARET BONDS—SOLOIST)

TWO NEGRO SPIRITUALS

(a) "Swing Low Sweet Chariot"

Arranged and orchestrated by H. T. BURLEIGH

(b) "Bye and Bye"

Arranged and orchestrated by ROLAND HAYES

BAMBOULA S. COLERIDGE-TAYLOR

THE PIANO IS A STEINWAY

and a key actor in the Harlem Renaissance. Records do not confirm Stephens' specific role in the musical education of Price or Still, but Barbara Garvey Jackson postulates that Stephens most likely would have encouraged their musical inclinations and gifts.¹⁰ Stephens was known to have catered to the need for recreational outlets in Little Rock by organizing communal entertainment in the form of skits, concerts and games.¹¹ Whether or not Price and Still participated in these events is, again, unconfirmed, but this detail certainly lends support to Jackson's theory.

Like Stephens, Price's circumstances were advantaged by her own set of peculiar privileges; and, like Stephens, Price set about devoting her time, energy, and resources to pursuing the path for which she seemed so destined. Stephens and Price were both sixteen years of age when they entered the academic worlds of Oberlin College and the New England Conservatory of Music, respectively. However, it must be recognized that Stephens was raised in the era of slavery and committed to the uplift of her race as a direct result of her experiences. In contrast, Price was raised in a generation that had moved somewhat beyond its predecessor's experiences. Price's relative privilege meant that there was a degree of freedom in her decision to immerse herself in African American culture. Indeed, Price's trajectory can be seen as a variation on the themes of education and enterprise that were so prevalent in Stephens' life and so redolent of the Talented-Tenth ideology, long before the term even came into existence. Thus, despite the parallels in their lives, there was a great disparity in the circumstances that encased the politics of their being.

The New England Conservatory of Music (1903–1906)

Price's pursuit of musical study at the New England Conservatory was by and large determined by which institutions would accept ethnic minority candidates; but even so, Price was encouraged to exercise caution in her own application. In an act of preservation, Price's mother presented Pueblo, Mexico, as Price's hometown.¹² The New England Conservatory did include African American students in its admissions policy, but such a policy could not overturn centuries of social conditioning and ensure Price's protection from her contemporaries' derivative attitudes. Price's mother capitalized on her daughter's racial ambiguity and, in doing so, etched a less stigmatized identity for her. Still, Price never forgot her heritage; and, as a composer, she would return to the New World Africanisms of her ancestors.

Price graduated with the highest honours, earning a double major in piano pedagogy and organ performance. She studied organ under the instruction of Henry M. Dunham, and she had clearly proven herself as an accomplished organist because on June 14, 1906, Price closed a concert featuring members of the graduating class with the first movement of her professor's *Sonata in G minor for Organ*.¹³ Her studies in instrumental performance and pedagogy were accompanied by courses in composition and counterpoint with George Whitefield Chadwick, (director of the New England Conservatory), Frederick Converse, and Benjamin Cutter. Under Chadwick, Price began to explore black folk idioms as source material for serious composition.¹⁴ This concept

had, however, been brought to mainstream attention a decade before Price enrolled at the conservatory.

In 1893, Antonín Dvořák's "New World" Symphony had shaken the American musical landscape, as had his controversial yet highly progressive statements about the establishment of an American school of music. In an article called "The Real Value of Negro Melodies," Dvořák is quoted as saying, "I am now satisfied that the future of this country must be founded upon what are called the negro melodies. . . . These beautiful and varied themes are the product of American soil. They are American."¹⁵ Dvořák's assertions were not widely embraced, but they certainly permeated the consciousness of many American composers.

However, the real roots of Price's compositional identity can be found in a long history of diasporic African composers who integrated vernacular styles with classical models. Hildred Roach traces this history back to "the earliest days of colonialism."¹⁶ She notes that "while some composers were treated as curiosities, others were recognized ever so slightly, thereby causing wide gaps in the documentaries of many."¹⁷ Indeed, the lack of documentation of early African American composers certainly problematizes any attempt to construct an ancestral history and to establish a cohesive and representative canon. Instead, what emerges are intermittent dots in time; but it could be argued that these dots portray, in the words of Roach, composers whose "musical creativity and gifts were so monumental that history could not entirely ignore their lucent manifestations or loud exclamations."¹⁸

Harry T. Burleigh (1866–1949) was one such composer. Burleigh was part of the first generation of post-slavery composers, who imbued their compositional voices with ancestral folk references and whose aesthetic could thus be viewed as nationalistic.¹⁹ Burleigh was best known for his contributions to art song and especially his arrangements of Negro spirituals for solo voice. He wrote of his approach: "My desire is to preserve them in harmonies that belong to modern methods of tonal progression without robbing the melodies of their racial flavor."²⁰ Burleigh's influence was far-reaching; his approach was embraced by subsequent generations of African American composers, including Price, but he also inspired a tradition of African American concert singers to include arrangements of Negro spirituals in their repertoire, from former student Abbie Mitchell to Roland Hayes, from Marian Anderson to Jessye Norman.

Burleigh studied with Dvořák at the National Conservatory of Music in New York and sang spirituals for the Bohemian composer, who encouraged his hybrid style.²¹ Yet Burleigh, unlike Dvořák, represented a more emic relationship with vernacular traditions. For Dvořák, and Chadwick, the sound-world of the black slave was a foreign one that could be visited through musical excursions, but their perspective was

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more akin to that of the tourist than the local. For Burleigh, however, this was a sound-world that had been passed down by his grandfather who would sing to him songs from the plantation, songs whose themes of uplift and freedom still had contemporary relevance. With Price emerging as part of the next generation of African American composers, she was further removed from Burleigh's experiences with black folk culture, and her privileged position augmented her distance from them. Still, the themes of the plantation songs reverberated even in Price's lifetime, which heightens the meaning of her decision to shape her compositional voice around European and African heritages; it was as though she were recognizing, even realizing, the politics of her existence in the nature of her aesthetic. Therefore, while Price may have enrolled in the New England Conservatory under the guise of Mexican nationality, as a composer thereafter, she aligned herself with the legacy of Burleigh and his predecessors.

Return to the South (1907–1927)

Price returned to Arkansas in 1906 and started her teaching career. As previously mentioned, education was the central tenet of the Talented-Tenth ideology; and, therefore, it is not surprising that teachers were often regarded as the pillars of their communities.²² Teachers historically came from middle-class backgrounds, and so the fact that Price turned to music education upon her return to the South perhaps reflected her awareness of the maximum opportunity available to a well-educated, middle-class, African American woman in the era of Jim Crow.

Price first taught at the Arkadelphia-Cotton Plant Academy in Cotton Plant, Arkansas. She then joined the music faculty at Shorter College in North Little Rock, before assuming the role of Head of the Music Department at Clark University in Atlanta, Georgia. As dictated by segregation, all of these institutions catered to a black demographic.

Price built a solid profile as an educator. She also provided private instruction in organ, piano and violin, and often composed her own material to suit her students' needs. Still, Price's qualifications and experience could easily be nullified by the colour of her skin. When she applied for membership of the Arkansas State Music Teachers Association, she was rejected because of her race. In a spirit of enterprise, however, Price established her own platform and founded the Little Rock Club of Musicians; this enabled her to program and perform her own compositions.²³

Price remained in the South until the late 1920s, but her counterpart and childhood friend William Grant Still had moved to Harlem in 1919. His move coincided with a cultural movement driven by African American thinkers and visionaries that spanned the 1920s and '30s. The Harlem Renaissance was "a moment of hope and confidence, a proclamation of independence, and the celebration of a new spirit exemplified in the New Negro."²⁴ The

goal to restore the dignity and assert the humanity of African Americans, both past and present, has been a consistent thread in the tapestry of this narrative. However, interpreting the first half of the twentieth century through the motivically dominant notions of rebirth and revitalization allowed new generations to continue this thread and weave it into their own definitions of modernity. Thus, if the turn of the century was epitomized in the Talented-Tenth ideology, the interwar years belonged to the philosophy of the New Negro. As influential Renaissance figure and New Negro exponent Alain Locke wrote: "The younger generation is vibrant with a new psychology; the new spirit is awake in the masses, and under the very eyes of the professional observers is transforming what has been a perennial problem into the progressive phases of contemporary Negro life."²⁵

Out of this climate emerged important platforms for artistic and intellectual expression. *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* was founded in 1923 and lived up to its name, offering a medium to African American artists and authors who had traditionally been met with silence by mainstream avenues.²⁶ Wealthy Harlem resident and businessman Casper Holstein donated \$1000 to *Opportunity* for the Holstein Prizes, to be awarded to composers and their winning submissions. Though Price never ventured to Harlem, news of the contest reached her nonetheless; and in 1926, Price was awarded second place in the Holstein competition for a piano suite entitled *In the Land O' Cotton*.

This suite evokes images of rural antebellum life by evoking plantation music and dances. "At the Cotton Gin" opens the suite with a strongly pentatonic flavour in the key of A-flat, grounding the music in folk influences. Open-fifth chords, provided by the tonic and dominant, reinforce the strong beats of the duple time signature, while quartal harmonies formed by the third and sixth degrees of the scale skip between the downbeats in playful syncopation. A simple melodic theme emerges after two bars, and even when the supporting harmonies become more chromatic, the melody never loses its simplicity. This piece is in ternary form and uses the key of E major to emphasize the contrasting middle section. Herein, a new melodic idea is accompanied by a left-hand pattern that calls to mind the "oom-pah" rhythms that would have been created by slaves using alternating foot taps and claps.

The bittersweet nostalgia is amplified in the second movement, entitled 'Dreaming.' Price marks the piece *andante con espressione*. As expected, this languid movement consists of a lyrical melody steeped in impressionist-leaning harmonies. The broken chord pattern that persists through much of the left-hand writing is very harp-like in its conception, and Price's use of whole-tone and chromatic colour reinforces the

character of this reverie. The third movement, ‘Song without Words,’ possesses a hymn-like quality in its use of chordal homophony and organ-inspired pedal points. It is as though Price, like Burleigh, has arranged a spiritual for piano and solo voice; but in the absence of words, Price leaves her listener to draw meaning from its poignant melody.

In the *Land O’ Cotton* closes with the lively “Dance.” This piece in rondo form is based on the Juba dance, which evolved as a New World manifestation of the African *Djouba* and the Caribbean *Majumba*.²⁷ In *Twelve Years a Slave*, Solomon Northup describes the patting actions of the Juba from his first-hand experience on the cotton plantations of Louisiana. He begins by explaining how the dancing would continue through the night and into the next day:

It does not cease with the sound of the fiddle, but in that case they set up a music peculiar to themselves. This is called “patting,” accompanied with one of those unmeaning songs, composed rather for its adaptation to a certain tune or measure, than for the purpose of expressing any distinct idea. The patting is performed by striking the hands on the knees, then striking the hands together, then striking the right shoulder with one hand, the left with the other—all the while keeping time with the feet and singing.²⁸

Price alludes to the Juba dance with an accompaniment that largely falls on the offbeat and a jaunty pentatonic tune that matches Northup’s account of the light-hearted role of the melody. Few first-hand accounts of the Juba exist, but the style survives through derivative forms such as the cakewalk and ragtime; and the connections can certainly be heard in this closing movement.

David Mannes, who judged the 1926 Holstein competition and was an active musician, conductor and educator in New York, observed: “For the second prize I would choose (No. 22), entitled ‘In the Land O’ Cotton’ four pieces for the pianoforte, charming compositions, simply and effectively written, especially the Dance.”²⁹ Price also achieved second place in the 1927 Holstein competition with a composition called *Memories of Dixie Land*.³⁰ Around the same time, she had also been attending summer courses at Chicago Musical College. There, she studied composition under Carl Busch and Wesley LaViolette and also enrolled in LaViolette’s orchestration classes.

Like Still and the Harlem Renaissance, it seemed Price’s compositional voice would emerge most fully in the energies of a socio-cultural movement, one that she would not find in Arkansas. Although her submissions to *Opportunity* linked her to the activities in Harlem, Price was to become an esteemed figure in the burgeoning cultural revolution that has come to be known as the Chicago Black Renaissance. It was not until Price moved to Chicago in 1927 that she would bring into more profound alignment a plat-

form for promoting her works, an opportunity for access, mobility and agency, and the dividends of the time she had spent honing her craft.

The Chicago years (1927–1953)

Price had met and married a lawyer called Thomas J. Price while teaching in Atlanta. Their family grew upon returning to Arkansas: together they had three children: Tommy, Florence Louise and Edith. Sadly, Tommy died in infancy, and with racial tensions escalating in Arkansas, there was further reason to fear for the lives of the two daughters. The murder of a twelve-year-old local white girl had left many white residents seeking commensurate retribution. The lynching of an African American man called John Carter, who was suspected of assaulting a white woman and her daughter, was no doubt another catalyst in the move to Chicago.³¹ Carter’s torturous death was perhaps all the more harrowing to Florence because of its close proximity to Mr. Price’s office. And so, in 1927, the Price family joined the Great Migration in a mass exodus that saw huge numbers of African Americans leave the southern states and head north and west.

Darlene Clark Hine notes that to Chicago came “both old settlers and new migrants, energetically engaged in the challenging work of community building, economic development, political engagement and the production of a new expressive culture giving voice and form to their New Negro, urban/cosmopolitan identities.”³² Helen Walker-Hill shows how “upon her arrival in Chicago, Price was welcomed into a vital and nurturing community.”³³

Estelle C. Bonds was a pivotal figure in building a new Chicago community for African Americans. Her home was a cultural hub for artists and intellectuals alike. She was a gifted musician, and her daughter, Margaret Bonds, was instilled with the same passion. The young Bonds later rose to prominence with her own works and performances and came to represent the next wave of African American women composers in Chicago. Both mother and daughter became cherished friends of Price; and through these friendships, Price’s circles grew to include composers such as Will Marion Cook, performers such as Abbie Mitchell, and poets such as Langston Hughes.³⁴ Her community also extended to organizations such as the R. Nathaniel Dett Club, the Chicago Music Association (CMA) and the Club of Women Organists.³⁵ Additionally, there were the networks that she would have established during her pursuit of further musical study at the Chicago Musical College, Chicago Teachers College, Chicago University, Central YMCA College, Lewis Institute, and the American Conservatory of Music.³⁶

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African American women composers thrived in this cultural climate, and they included the previously mentioned Margaret Bonds. Bonds' compositional output consisted of solo piano pieces, art songs, and chamber and orchestral works. As a composer, she filled European forms with spiritual melodies, blues harmonies, and jazz rhythms. Irene Britton Smith, a Chicago native, also composed during this time and knew both Price and the Bonds family. She studied music theory and composition with professor Stella Roberts at the American Conservatory, continued her studies with Vittorio Giannini at Juilliard, and eventually became a student of Nadia Boulanger during her time at Fontainebleau Conservatory in France.³⁷ Smith's available works are small in number but reveal neoclassicist interests. There is also an inclination to explore other modernist trends, such as post-tonal techniques. Smith's work makes it evident that there were other women composers during this time and that their activities were not isolated events, but rather very much consistent with the active role that women in both continental and diasporic African and European cultures have always played in music-making.

A more prominent name in the Chicago Black Renaissance (as well as a leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance) was Nora Douglas Holt.³⁸ Holt was a composer, but her output of over two hundred works has been lost and what remains of it is a single piece called *Negro Dance* for solo piano, which was published. The composition pays tribute to the Juba. Holt was also a music critic for the *Chicago Defender* in the years leading up to the Chicago Black Renaissance. Her documentation of African American musical achievement was another example of the various and essential acts of community building. Holt co-founded the National Association of Negro Musicians (NANM); the CMA was its first branch. The NANM takes on a greater significance when understood in the context of the restrictions faced by practitioners of African descent. The reinforcement of segregation prevented many black composers entering certain concert halls, let alone having their works programmed, published or promoted on the more mainstream platforms; thus organizations such as the NANM provided a crucial service.

These profiles of Bonds, Smith, and Holt demonstrate the diversity of Chicago's artistic communities and the significance of contributions by African American women during this era. Women, in fact, occupied positions of leadership: Estella Bonds had been the president of the Chicago Treble Clef Club, with Price acting as director. Estella had also been the president of the CMA, as had Holt and Neota L. McCurdy Dyett. The NANM saw three women presidents in succession between the years of 1930 and 1938: Lillian LeMon, Maude Roberts George, and Camille L. Nickerson. George had also presided over the R. Nathaniel Dett Club. Through the leadership and active involvement of numerous women, the community built artistic platforms. These platforms elevated the musical expression of African American women com-

posers, and therein provided significant opportunities for the creators.

The patrons of Chicago's artistic communities were Americans of African and European descent. They shared the belief that the advances of black men and women in the arts could dismantle white supremacy; their artistic achievements, they believed, would prove their vast intellectual and emotional capacity and validate the case for true liberation.³⁹ The Wanamaker family, guided by Rodman Wanamaker, though strongly associated with northern philanthropy and white patronage, centred on empowering suppressed communities, from the homeless in Philadelphia to the dwindling Native American population. Rodman's sympathy for African Americans and his interest in their music spawned the Rodman Wanamaker Music Contests. These provided African American composers with opportunities for greater recognition and operated in partnership with the NANM.

Price entered the 1932 Rodman Wanamaker Music Contest. This was a national competition offering a total of \$1,000 in cash prizes and was on a much grander scale than the Holstein competitions that she had entered a few years earlier. Price placed first in the piano composition category with her *Sonata in E Minor* and was awarded \$250. She also won the symphonic category and received \$500 for her *Symphony No. 1 in E Minor*.

Sonata in E Minor, for solo piano, consists of three movements: "Andante-Allegro," "Andante" and "Allegro." The sonata—and the symphony—is as much rooted in classical music as it is inspired by vernacular idioms. This is evidenced by an array of influences, from the Beethovenian thick chordal textures and dotted rhythms that open the first movement to various melodic themes throughout that draw on the stanzaic form and meter of plantation songs. Price's *Symphony No. 1 in E Minor* comprises four movements: "Allegro ma non troppo," "Largo, maestoso," "Juba Dance" and "Finale." Her use of an extended percussion section that included large and small African drums, wind whistles, and cathedral chimes showed that Price was certainly thinking beyond a conventional compositional framework. Price alludes to the sound-world of the spiritual in "Allegro ma non troppo" by means of a resolute-sounding pentatonic theme in E. Sacred overtones seep into the "Largo, maestoso," recalling Price's "Song Without Words" in its solemn religious tone. "Juba Dance" brings the musical sounds of the plantation to life with imitations of fiddles, banjos and "patting" rhythms. The "Finale," though the most conventional of all the movements, also employs folk idioms such as call and response patterns and lively syncopations. Price's Wanamaker wins were a huge achievement, and they led to another momentous opportunity.

Price's symphony had caught the attention of the German composer and conductor Frederick Stock, the music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, who had been looking for appropriate works to perform at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. On June 15, 1933, Stock and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra premiered Price's symphony at the World's Fair; and at that moment, Price became the first African American woman composer to have a symphonic work performed by a major national orchestra. The symphony performance, underwritten by Maude Roberts George, was a great success. In subsequent months, Price's compositions found their way into the World's Fair Century of Progress Exhibitions and also into events held by the International Congress of Women and the National Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).⁴⁰

Price's successes were tangible evidence of social progress that resonated deeply in black communities. Eileen Southern explains how composers such as Price were essentially "race symbols, whose successes were shared vicariously by the great mass of black Americans that could never hope to attain similar distinction."⁴¹ When black composers and musicians succeeded in a climate that had been conditioned to suppress their achievement, a demonstrable step had been taken towards improved race relations.

However, in the culture of Western classical music, Price was more a representative of her race. Achieving success in a culture that was not only racialized as white but also gendered as male made her into a symbol for those whose identities and experiences were shaped by preconceptions attached to either race or gender—or both. The dual nature of Price's accomplishments was certainly not lost on the African American composer and author Shirley Graham Du Bois who, in 1936, wrote the following: "Spirituals to symphonies in less than fifty years! How could they attempt it? Among her millions of citizens, America can boast of but a few symphonists. . . . And one of these symphonists is a woman! Florence B. Price."⁴²

In 1951, Price received a call from Sir John Barbirolli, the music director of the Manchester-based Hallé Orchestra in England. He wanted her to compose an orchestral work based on traditional spirituals. Price completed the score, but could not make the performance due to persistent heart problems. Her name and reputation had reached Europe but she, unfortunately, would not. In 1953, she prepared for a trip to Paris, where she was to receive an award; but her heart problems resurfaced and on the third of June 1953, Price passed away at St. Luke's Hospital in Chicago.

Sixty-four years after her passing, it is fair to say that in the widely accepted accounts of Western music history, Florence Beatrice Price simply does not exist. She does not fit the linear progression perpetuated by this history; and to complicate matters further, the politics of her being and the features of her style

warrant an altogether different kind of framework for understanding—one that does not "Other" or marginalize her experiences and achievements. Price's legacy lies in accounts that are just now emerging, accounts that reflect the plurality of human expression. A commitment towards more diversified narratives can ensure that our present era affords women composers of the past—albeit posthumously—a much-deserved platform for their musical output and access, mobility, and agency in spheres that once excluded them from opportunity. Steps in this direction cannot change the circumstances experienced by such women, but recognize, at the very least, that for those who lived unapologetically and composed passionately, now is surely their time.

Notes:

This article is based on my lecture-recital "A Celebration of Women in Music," delivered in Singapore in December 2016.

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- ² *Ibid.*
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- ⁷ Florence Beatrice Price to Serge Koussevitzky, July 5, 1943, in *Florence Price: Symphonies Nos. 1 and 3*, xxxv.
- ⁸ "The Price of Admission: A Musical Biography of Florence Beatrice Price," narrated by Terrance McKnight, *WQXR*, February 6, 2013, accessed December 15, 2017, <http://www.wqxr.org/story/271521-musical-biography-florence-beatrice-price/>.
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- ¹⁰ Barbara Garvey Jackson, "Florence Price, Composer," *The Black Perspective in Music* 5, no. 1 (1977): 33.
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- ¹² Florence Beatrice Smith Price Papers (MC 988), Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*

- ¹⁴ “The Price of Admission: A Musical Biography of Florence Beatrice Price.”
- ¹⁵ “The Real Value of Negro Melodies,” *New York Herald* (1893): 28.
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- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ *New York World* (1924). Quoted in Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 271.
- ²¹ Jean Snyder, *Harry T. Burleigh: From the Spiritual to the Harlem Renaissance* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016).
- ²² Karen A. Johnson, Abul Pitre and Kenneth L. Johnson, eds., *African American Women Educators: A Critical Examination of their Pedagogies, Educational Ideas, and Activism from the Nineteenth to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 209.
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- ²⁷ Eileen Southern and Josephine Wright, *Images: Iconography of Music in African American Culture, 1770s–1920s* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 2000), 26.
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About the author

Samantha Ege is a pianist and music teacher at the United World College of Southeast Asia, Singapore. She is from England and has taught internationally for six years. She holds a B. A. in Music from the University of Bristol, during which time she was also an exchange student at McGill University (Canada). She is currently conducting her Ph.D. in Music at the University of York, where her research focuses on the aesthetic of Florence Price. In Spring 2018, Ege will be releasing a discovery album with Wave Theory Records that spotlights the piano music of Florence Price, Vítězslava Kaprálová, Ethel Bilsland, and Margaret Bonds.



Four Women. Music by Kaprálová, Bilsland, Price and Bonds. Samantha Ege, piano. Wave Theory Records, April 2018.

Nina Simone wrote a song called “Four Women.” Each verse is about an African American woman who is ultimately trapped in her stereotype despite seeking her own self-definition. To some extent, Simone was trapped in a similar way. She had always wanted to become a classical pianist, but was rejected from this path on the grounds of her race. She pursued a highly successful career in jazz, but like the four women in her song, her path was affected by external prejudices. The album I have recorded with Wave Theory Records progresses the conversation and reimagines the circumstances. I tell the musical stories of another set of four women: Florence Price, Margaret Bonds, Vítězslava Kaprálová, and Ethel Bilsland. They were not immune to prejudice, but certainly carved an existence beyond societal expectations. I hope that my Four Women can be seen as a fitting tribute to Simone—the classical pianist that we will never know.

Samantha Ege

Vítězslava Kaprálová: Dopisy domů, Dopisy láskám, Dopisy přátelům. Ed. Karla Hartl. Toronto: The Kapralova Society 2015, 2016, 2017.

První svazek souborné korespondence Vítězslavy Kaprálové (Dopisy domů) v edici Karly Hartl se dočkal vřelého přijetí a další dva si udržely stejně vysoký standard objeveností, pečlivostí zpracování i krásným stylovým designem (graficky upravil Lukáš Hyřha). Český čtenář nemůže vzít kterýkoli z těchto tří svazků do rukou jinak než s pocitem piety a úcty k životu a dílu této jedinečné skladatelské osobnosti. Kompetentní edice, která snese přísná hlediska práce s dokumenty, přichází ve svou dobu. Od konce druhé světové války se pohledy na Kaprálovou, její životní příběh a její tvorbu, postupně proměňovaly, přičemž její korespondence v nich hrála důležitou roli – ovšem převážně v útržkové podobě, nejednou v nepřesných citacích a skoro vždy ve věcném výkladu až příliš uzpůsobeném optice toho kterého autora. První menší studie na téma Kaprálové měly převážně ráz vzpomínek a osobních úvah jejích současníků. Čestnou výjimku z takového ladění mají dvě muzikologicky pojaté studie, Otakara Šourka (Orchestrální a komorní hudba Kaprálové) a Ludvíka Kundery (Klavírní a vokální dílo Kaprálové), otištěné v pietním sborníku, uspořádaném po skončení války Přemyslem Pražákem. Podat „co nejpřesvědčivější obraz umělecké osobnosti“ se pokusil v padesátých letech monografií *Vítězslava Kaprálová* Jiří Macek a velká exploze dalšího zájmu se odehrála později, podnícena literárními činnostmi skladatelčina manžela, spisovatele Jiřího Muchy.

Umělecké uchopení cizího, reálného života přináší vždy subjektivní deformaci v pohledu na něj a na jeho společenské ukotvení, jak jsme toho svědky u každého biografického ohlasu – připomeňme například pro muzikologa jen velice málo přesvědčivou filmovou vizi Formanova *Mozarta*, originálního *Bee-thovena* Agnieszky Holland nebo třeba geniální románovou metaforu Arnolda Schönberga u Thomase Manna (*Doktor Faustus*). Muzikologie se však snaží od subjektivního domýšlení tvůrčí osobnosti odhlédnout a pokročit v analýze dále, aby na základě spolehlivých faktů dosáhla soudů, které jsou obecně platné či alespoň stojí ve věčné kritice. Takový velký první krok spolehlivosti v pohledu na život a dílo Kaprálové učinila právě až cleveldomá práce Karly Hartl, která se stala mezinárodním garantem odkazu významné české skladatelky. Po studiích na Karlově univerzitě a na University of Toronto žije v Kanadě, kde roku 1998 založila Kapralova Society. Životní zájem o tuto skladatelku ozdobila impozantní činností v jejím jméně (mimo jiné vydáním takřka veškerého životního díla Kaprálové tiskem a na hudebních nosičích). Vydané tři svazky korespondence přenášejí nyní tuto aktivitu do skladatelčiny vlastní a jsou velkou splátkou na dluh, který vůči Vítězslavě Kaprálové máme.

Každý z nich umožňuje orientaci po věcně spřízněném výseku profilu osobnosti a jejího (bohužel nepříliš rozměrného) životního díla. Z vazby na rodiče je na dopisech spolehlivě vidět, že matka tu byla přístavem citu a domova, kdežto skladatelé a hudebnímu pedagogu Václavu Kaprálovi přiznávala jeho milovaná dcera trvale navíc i jeho odbornou kvalifikaci. Její krátká, ale dramatická cesta životem, její hledání orientace, které ji vedlo z Brna nejprve do Prahy a potom do Paříže, je utajena v dopisech prvního svazku *Dopisy domů*. Jak do života mladé, od rodičů osamocené dívky vstupují muži, je dokumentárně ukázáno v *Dopisech láskám* (druhý svazek korespondence), Rudolfo Kopcovi a Jiřímu Muchovi, k nimž by ovšem zasloužil být přibrán i Bohuslav Martinů, kdyby se písemná komunikace Kaprálové s ním dochovala. Pozoruhodným reflektorem také na politické postoje skladatelky jsou partie, které si vynutila historie roku 1938 a dalších. Před čtenářem dozrává mladistvá pisatelka v osobnost samostatně uvažující a plně souznějící s progresivními proudy své doby. Jiný vlned do intimity života skladatelky poskytuje třetí svazek, odkrývající například málo známý fenomén mecenášství v osobě osvětleného podnikatele. Pro badatele, který vytvoří analytickou monografii na téma Vítězslava Kaprálová, opřenou o spolehlivá pramenná východiska, jsou tyto knihy neocenitelnou základnou. Ne třeba poznamenávat, že k tomuto úkolu je dnes asi nejlépe připravena právě editorka této korespondence, jak to dokládají její kompetentní komentáře a poznámkový aparát.

Jaroslav Mihule



presents:

The 'Women Compose' Music Festival
2018
March 7-11, 2018
Basel, Switzerland

Chamber and symphonic music by Isabel Mundry, Sofia Gubaidulina, Barbara Strozzi, Antonia Padoani Bembo, Elisabeth Claude Jacquet de la Guerre, Susan Doll, Louise Farrenc, Clara Schumann, Johanna Senfter, Esther Flückiger, Fanny Hensel, Mel Bonis, Emma Lou Diemer, Vítězslava Kaprálová, Alma Mahler, Isabelle Aboulker, Caroline Charrière, Agnes Tyrrell, Alma Deutscher, Heidi Baader-Nobs, Amy Beach, May Aufderheide, Julia Lee Niebergall, Sadie Koninsky, Irene Giblin, Adeline Shepherd, Nathalie Laesser Zweifel, Carla Bley, and Billy Holiday.

Chamber music performed by David Blunden, (organ), Jiri Nemecek (violin), Ludovic van Hellemont (piano), Nicoleta Paraschivescu (organ), Aria Quartet, Maya Boog (soprano), Simon Bucher (piano), Els Biesemans (piano), Kirsten Johnson (piano), Marcus Schwarz (piano), Esther Flückiger (piano), Nathalie Laesser Zweifel (piano).

Symphonic music performed by the L'anima giusta Orchestra (leader Jiri Nemecek), conducted by Jessica Horsley.

Festival highlights:

Symphony concert on Saturday, March 10 at Theodorskirche, Basel: World premiere of Overture to the oratorio *Die Könige in Israel* by Agnes Tyrrell (1846–1883) and Amy Beach's *Gaelic Symphony*.

Chamber concert on Saturday, March 10 at Ackermannshof, Basel: String Quartet, op. 8 by Vítězslava Kaprálová (1915–1940).

For a detailed festival schedule, visit
<http://frauenkomponiert.ch>



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Scarborough, Ontario
M1T 1N1 Canada

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editor@kapralova.org

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