

Reviews: Digital and Multimedia Scholarship

Fantasia nègre: The Piano Music of Florence Price, by Samantha Ege. Lorelt LNT 144, 2021, CD.

Since the recent processing of the addenda to the Florence Beatrice Smith Price Collection at the University of Arkansas Library and Archives and G. Schirmer's acquisition of her catalog, interest in the composer and her music has flowered into a revival, albeit one with a peculiar frame. In concert halls, on recordings, and in musicological discourse and pedagogy, the revival of this Black woman's music unfolds in a sociopolitical climate where new social movements, memorial hashtags, and hefty critiques of establishments shape ongoing calls for change and expansion within the musical academy—and, perhaps, the academy at large. Put succinctly, the histories, oeuvres, and sounds of Price, other women composers, and other composers of color fuel responses to such calls. In a compelling examination of the historical Price, Douglas Shadle positions a 2018 recording of her two violin concertos and the ensuing critical response to it at the center of the Price renaissance.¹ Samantha Ege's 2021 *Fantasia nègre* recording, then, may signal the end of the renaissance and Price's arrival as a preeminent figure within the New Negro Movement and a distinguished voice in American classical music.

While Ege's *Fantasia nègre* will appeal to an array of classical music consumers, the recording reaches beyond those listeners, inviting scholars to consider the idea of genre in those of Price's works that bear that title and offering compelling performances of "sketches" and a reconstructed *Fantasia*—made possible through analysis and combing the archives. As a pianist, Ege exhibits sparkling technique and an aptitude for bringing out melodic lines and figures. From the Black vernacular thematic material of the *Fantasies* through the fanciful tunes of the *Untitled Sketches* to the modernist leanings of the *Snapshots*, Price's lyricism is foregrounded in each performance. Ege's renderings breathe easily, as larger formal structures in each composition are articulated with a convincing blend of balance, phrasing, and nuance. When considered as part of a recent wave of Price recordings, and alongside Lara Downes's *Florence Price: Piano Discoveries*

1. Douglas Shadle, "Plus ça change: Florence B. Price in the #BlackLivesMatter Era," *New-MusicBox*, February 20, 2019, <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/plus-ca-change-florence-b-price-in-the-blacklivesmatter-era/>. The recording in question is *Florence Price: Violin Concerto no. 1, Violin Concerto no. 2; Ryan Cockerham: Before, It Was Golden*, Er-Gene Kahng (violin), Janáček Philharmonic, Ryan Cockerham, Albany TROY 1706, 2018, CD.

in particular, Ege's project expands our perception of the composer's voice and offers fresh interpretations of previously recorded pieces.² In addition to multiple recordings of the Piano Sonata in E Minor, we now have multiple contemporary recordings of Price's *Fantasia nègre no. 2* and *Fantasia nègre no. 4*.

Music scholars are likely to find plenty more to mine from Ege's project. First, it includes the first recording of Price's *Fantasia nègre no. 3*. If the second fantasy "offers a glimpse into the more intense and introspective side of Price's compositional personality," then the third, in F minor, projects a more playful and enterprising Price. Ege's notes on reconstructing the piece are suggestive:

The first page contains the title and a grand opening that affirms its place among the other fantasies. . . . As with the other fantasies, the theme is sometimes encased in the minor key and at other times is harmonised in a major key. The second page ends in A♭ major. No other pages follow. . . . I re-examined the manuscript and realised that Price had more to say in the key of A♭ major. . . . I was then able to identify the missing half of the piece. Price's surviving papers gave me everything I needed.³

Not only does Price have more to say in A-flat major, the piece also ends in A-flat major. This feature, ending in the relative major key, distinguishes it from the other fantasies. While Price's penchant for chromatic excursion and densely voiced harmonies is on full display, the spritely theme of the third fantasy weaves nimbly into and out of the relative key and affords convincing modulations. The ultimate arrival and concluding gestures in A-flat major are thus anticipated by these imaginative excursions. Ege's persistence in searching the archive for the missing portions of the manuscript is truly noteworthy here. Her reconstruction of a piece that may have been considered lost completes the set and positions Price's fantasies as a subgenre for inventive exploration of Black nationalistic compositional thought during the New Negro Movement. Given the limited access to classical music venues for the majority of Black people (even in metropolitan areas during the 1930s), it is understandable that the symphony was exalted as perhaps the loftiest of accomplishments by Black composers (including William Grant Still, William Dawson, and Price herself) in the early decades of the twentieth century. In Price's fantasies, however, we have another medium for examining Black nationalistic musical utterances in instrumental music.

As well as offering the first recording of the third fantasy, Ege's project is the first to include all of Price's fantasies. The prevailing neo-Romantic spirit of the pieces prompts consideration of the inspiration that may have come from Price's encounters with the fantasies of Brahms and Schumann during

2. Lara Downes, *Florence Price: Piano Discoveries*, available through digital download: <http://www.laradownes.com/store/florence-price-piano-discoveries-digital-download>.

3. Ege, *Fantasia nègre*, liner notes.

her years studying piano and organ at the New England Conservatory. Price moves beyond these models through a range of developmental journeys and technical displays involving Black folk-based themes. The fantasia, as generally perceived and approached in the nineteenth century, was a genre/space in which composers were not stifled by the expectations of structural models. Perhaps it is here, in the fantasies, that Price was most inventive and demanding of performers and herself. Whereas the fantasy in E minor (no. 1) is an adaptation of the spiritual “Sinner Please Don’t Let This Harvest Pass,” the other three involve original themes that are sonically akin to spiritual melodies. Amid many moments of chromatic flair and adventure, these folk themes speak and signify; they sing through various harmonic and textural contexts—again, Ege’s commitment to line in the performances is key here. Price’s deft handling of traditional formal models is unmistakable in the symphonies and sonatas, but her fantasies are both resourceful and heroic, working skillfully toward exhausting the developmental possibilities of the Black vernacular musical subjects. Furthermore, hearing and experiencing them as a series—three of the four were composed in 1932—is a worthwhile undertaking: there is a compelling narrative that walks the listener from variations on a preexisting spiritual tune in the first fantasy to the “colossal” *Fantasia nègre no. 4*, performed by Ege in the “original and complete version [that] reflects the diverse and unfettered palette of Price’s artistic expression.”⁴ To date, the only other recording of the fourth fantasy is of a revised version that was likely premiered in 1937.⁵

In addition to the trailblazing work of reviving the third fantasy and recording the entire set, Ege’s project offers performances of “three additional untitled (and undated) pieces for solo piano” that Ege came across while looking through the archives for the fantasies. “They were numbered in a way that suggested an incomplete set [nos. 2, 3, and 4]. . . . As I played through them, I heard three self-contained miniatures. . . . They displayed another dimension of Price’s compositional voice, beyond her Black folkloric style. I began to think of these works as untitled sketches: three scenes open to the interpretation and imagination of the listener.”⁶ While I agree with Ege’s note about the absence of an overarching vernacular presence in the sketches, one certainly encounters thrilling chromatic excursions, dance-like episodes, and definitive structural returns—hallmarks, of sorts, for Price. Ege’s decision to include these miniatures not only obliges us to experience the composer beyond Black nationalistic themes and cultural emblems, but also challenges the scholar to listen closely, to contextualize the strong idiomatic writing for the instrument within our current

4. Ibid.

5. Downes, *Florence Price: Piano Discoveries*. Ege notes that the work underwent several revisions before its 1937 premiere.

6. Ege, *Fantasia nègre*, liner notes.

knowledge of Price as practitioner, and to position these sketches as part of a much more complex compositional palette than we have come to associate with her. Indeed, one might argue that her Romantic leanings, or perhaps the adept manipulations of harmonic and gestural language that convey the neo-Romantic spirit for which she is best known, are close to exhaustion in the fanciful third sketch, which features strident harmonic complexes and an irregular 5/4 meter.

Among the more captivating of the works included in the project, at least for this reviewer, are the *Snapshots*. If the *Untitled Sketches* gesture toward modernist ideas, the *Snapshots* take a bona fide step in that direction. Every piece on the CD invites analysis, and for me this was especially true of the *Snapshots*, in which Price explores the potentials of modernism while preserving mere traces of tonality. Completed in 1952, this set of pieces is among the last of her compositions. On the musical surface, one hears a number of post-tonal devices such as added-note chords, extended tertian harmonies, sophisticated uses of pitch centrality, and hints of whole-tone collections. Price's handling of texture, however, is significant, as her treatments evocatively set the mood/character of each piece in the set. The perpetual, undulating small note values of "Lake Mirror" suggest an ebb and flow, while the scattered moments of whole-tone symmetries convey a mirroring of sorts. A relatively thin texture offers an almost ethereal impression, and yet the steady rhythmic pulse produces a restless, rippling effect. Ege's phrasing of melodic gestures is lyrical, fully complementing this watery, wavy effect. In "Moon behind a Cloud," sparse episodic utterances portray a stratum of slowly moving clouds. These utterances vary in rhythmic character and density but seem to revolve around two main pitch centers linked by a mediant relationship. While the pitch centers are affirmed by way of thick root-position chords that peek through the terraced layers of activity, the rhythmic vitality and unpredictability of the episodes provide ample motion and suspense. Furthermore, there are times when the episodes migrate away from the centers, adding post-tonal chordal complexes to the already hazy soundscape. The more audible (and less complicated) tertian sonorities are therefore suggestive of a more stable body—the moon—in a scene where it briefly appears before being once again concealed by moving clouds. The final piece in the set, "Flame," is both capricious and technically formidable. In the course of executing Price's persistent driving pulse and rhythmic figurations, Ege's interpretation captures the nuance of subtle changes in harmonic color that depict sudden changes in the shapes of flames. Pitch centers shift quickly but are identifiable through the register and reiteration of certain pitches. These attributes also contribute to the overarching ternary design of "Flame," and contrast is primarily facilitated through changes in texture.

In the afterword to Rae Linda Brown's biographical account *The Heart of a Woman: The Life and Music of Florence B. Price*, Carlene J. Brown offers

the following reflection: “More important than the lectures and scholarship, Rae Linda sought tirelessly to have Price’s music *heard* or as she put it, ‘to bring Florence Price to life through performance.’ . . . As she stated in her replies to requests [for scores], ‘I am most interested in the opportunity for audiences to hear this music.’”⁷ It is in this sense that Ege’s project does significant work: not only do we *hear* Florence Price, we are granted the opportunity to engage with the breadth of her compositional voice. No longer can we limit our understanding of and interpretive stances toward Price to Black nationalist tenets. While studies of the set of *Fantasies* would certainly add more context and musical examples for Price’s placement within the group of notable artists and musicians of the New Negro Movement, Ege’s additional curation of the *Untitled Sketches* and *Snapshots* positions her as an ever-evolving creative. One question that emerges from this project is that of the connections between Price’s piano works and chamber/orchestral works. In terms of composition dates, thematic treatments, and formal considerations, there are a few parallels that could be drawn between the Piano Sonata in E Minor and the First Symphony. Now that we can hear—and hopefully one day see—the sketches and developmental episodes in the re-constructed third fantasy, one wonders if there may be connections between the fantasies and other works with different performance forces. Taken together, the tracks of Ege’s recording celebrate Price as a composer of stature and require us to take note, not because of historic “firsts” but because of the undeniable craft that this project so convincingly displays.

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I Used to Love to Dream, by A. D. Carson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020. URL: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11738372>

Introduction

Few scholars have had as highly publicized a junior faculty career as A. D. Carson, Assistant Professor of Hip-Hop and the Global South at the University of Virginia (UVA). In 2017, Carson made national headlines as the Clemson University doctoral candidate who submitted his dissertation in the form of a thirty-four-track rap album entitled “Owning My Masters: The Rhetorics of Rhymes and Revolutions.” Carson used the album to reflect upon his experience of living in Clemson, South Carolina, as a Black graduate student navigating a predominantly white Southern university campus structured by physical markers and histories of white supremacy. Rather than

7. Rae Linda Brown, *The Heart of a Woman: The Life and Music of Florence B. Price*, ed. Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 240.