

FLORENCE PRICE:
A STORY OF RESILIENCE THROUGH ART

By
Timothy Brice Kimble

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Approved by:

Dr. John Milbauer, Professor
Fred Fox School of Music

Abstract

Florence Price's unique compositional style quietly advocates for change in the realm of classical music. In recognizing the homogeneity within the sphere of performance and addressing shortcomings of the educational system, Price's diary entries can explain the compositional choices made within several of her works, especially her *Sonata in E Minor*. Her upbringing as a Black woman in racially integrated Arkansas has informed her decisions as a composer, as she incorporates African American traditions in her writing: specifically, through the incorporation of spirituals and rhythmic elements of the cakewalk and ragtime. In addition to the following document, a presentation on Florence Price's life and works has been delivered that included a live performance of the *Sonata in E Minor*. The research was informed by the archives at the New England Conservatory and the special collections archive at the University of Arkansas.

Modern criticisms of Western classical music argue that the field is behind the times, that the classical music canon has remained largely unchanged in an ever-changing world. Orchestras across the globe have attempted to address this criticism by commissioning works by non-white and/or female composers, but in doing so, they overlook a healthy body of music already written by underrepresented minorities. A composer who fits this description is Florence Price, whose works received national awards at their time of composition but have fallen out of the public's eye. Price was a pioneer of her time, combining folk music from her childhood with conservatory teachings of her late teens within her compositions to develop a musical language whose unique quality is inseparable from her racial background.

Born in Little Rock, Arkansas on April 9, 1887, Price lived in a racially integrated community where her mother was a schoolteacher and her father was a dentist (the only black one in the city). At age fourteen she graduated as valedictorian from her high school and immediately left Arkansas for Massachusetts to attend the New England Conservatory, where she studied organ and piano performance. Her mother advised her not to reveal her racial and ethnic identity on her application for fear she would not be discriminated and denied admission, rather than accepted (Walwyn, 2020). As such, Price did not indicate that she was Black¹ on her application to the school, instead applying as a student of Mexican descent.²

Price's mother, Florence Irene, knew the possible effects of segregation on her daughter's talents, for the Music Teachers Association in Arkansas was exclusively white and did not allow black teachers. As such, Irene knew her daughter's chances of getting into a prestigious conservatory would be higher if she did not disclose her true racial identity. Price was accepted,

¹ In her life, Florence Price referred to herself as "Negro," but in keeping with appropriate modern vernacular, she will henceforth be referred to as Black.

² Price's graduation program from the New England Conservatory indicates that she was from Pueblo, Mexico, which was not true.

and during her time at the conservatory, racial tensions in Arkansas only heightened. Upon her return to Arkansas, a lynching indicated to Price that she had to leave. In 1927, she moved to Chicago (Walwyn, 2020).

Life in Chicago was still a challenge. Price joined various organizations to promote diversity in the world of performance, including the R. Nathaniel Dett Club of Music and the Allied Arts, The Chicago Music Association, and the National Association of Negro Musicians, Inc. These organizations provided opportunities to non-white performers, creating an array of venues that would allow Black musicians to perform, and provided scholarships to Black musicians who wished to continue their studies. Gunshots could be heard from outside of several of these organizations' board meetings—an attempt to threaten Florence Price and her Black colleagues—and it is during her first years in Chicago that Price first began to take advocacy and composition seriously (Walwyn, 2020).

In the late 1920s Price's first compositions were published by G. Schirmer and McKinley, most notably art songs, spirituals, works for organ, and instructional pieces for piano. She submitted two pieces to the 1932 Wanamaker Competition in Chicago, winning first prize for her *Symphony in E Minor*, and second prize *Piano Sonata in E Minor*. As the first prize winner, Price's Symphony was played by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, establishing Price the first Black female composer to have a work played by a major American orchestra (Walwyn, 2020). While this honor gave Florence Price recognition and fame, it would seem her music could not speak for itself in the world of Jim Crow.³ Florence Price would struggle for continued

³ Jim Crow Laws were state-mandated, and therefore legal, at the time for its “separate but equal” treatment of Blacks and other non-white populations. These laws prevented non-white people from entering establishments or using provided amenities (such as public restrooms and water fountains). Americans of color were instead given less-adequate and underfunded versions of the same services and institutions.

recognition in an American social landscape saturated with racism, sexism, and segregation (“Jim Crow Laws,” 2018).

Florence Price’s diary entries indicate her awareness of a contradiction between American ideals and American practices. She writes in a diary kept from 1947 to 1950 that the effort put towards attaining a “homogeneous culture” does not fit with the multitude of “reasons for immigration to the U.S.,” which were varied and dependent upon individual differences and motivations.⁴ The idea of a “homogenous culture” has long prevailed in the United States’ top symphony orchestras, with an emphasis on the music of European men. The ‘three B’s’ of classical music (Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms) continue to hold a tight grip on performances, with the overall 2019-2020 orchestral season featuring more works by Beethoven alone (10.5% of all works performed), than works by all women composers, dead or alive (9.5% of all works performed) (Institute for Composer Diversity, 2019). Florence Price both prophesized and criticized the societal need for institutional continuity in the 1947-50 diary entries, writing that American music is reluctant to grow and flourish as an independent entity. She states that Americans “...are reluctant to give way to a new [kind] of thought,” and that, “Music, like religion, goes deep. We are reluctant to make sudden changes.” The above statistics prove that these writings from seventy years ago still hold tremendous weight today. Even with greater efforts being made to change the largely homogenous culture of classical music, audiences and orchestras are largely unreceptive.

Price also heavily criticized the realm of music scholarship. In her 1947-50 diary entries⁴ she notes that, “Schools teach standard and old music because an orchestra would not bother with an unknown.” For her, music scholarship was not independent of music performance,

⁴Diary entries obtained from the special collections archive at the University of Arkansas.

implying that the homogenous culture that prevails in programming orchestral seasons is hindering the education system as a result. These two worlds contribute to her dissatisfaction with prevailing musical sameness, and also illuminate the ways in which Florence Price understood that she was silenced as a minority in the field. The same entry details a wanting to depart from this tradition, proposing the solution that the American system as a whole “break from the strangle hold which commercialism has on schools, broadcasting, and recordings.” From this, it becomes clear that Price was not only concerned with traditional practices in music, but that she was critical of American commercialism as a whole. The triangular relationship between scholarship, performance, and capitalism, for Price, was of a cyclical nature with no clear beginning or end: they are perpetually shaping and bolstering one another, and preventing new voices, such as Price’s, from speaking.

As a composer, Price was frequently addressed incorrectly by notable musicians and publishers. Upon publishing her first works, Florence Price’s publisher, Edgar R. Clark, wrote a letter⁵ delineating her royalties for sale of compositions. In this typed letter, the printed addressee is marked, “Gentlemen.” To add to this error, “gentlemen” was sloppily crossed out with a pen, with the hand-corrected “Mrs. Price,” written above; it seems that to retype the letter would be too great an imposition. The offenses made towards Price by the publishing industry do not end here: in a letter to the American Music Institute, Price expresses anger towards her publishers for allowing changes to her original writings and printing the changed works using Price’s name. In the letter, she refers to the changed publications as mere “arrangements” of her original work, calling the modifications an attempt to “change [the work] into jazz of an inferior sort.” These glaring and objectionable interactions with the publishing industry seem to indicate that Price

⁵ Personal letters obtained from the special collections archive at the University of Arkansas.

was not taken seriously by her sponsors, both as a composer and as an advocate for herself. Their incorrect titles and unwillingness to publish Price's original material only support her disdain for the publishing industry and largely, her criticisms of commercialism that are inherent to the prospect of American homogeneity.

Price proposed a solution. She wrote that the recognition and remembrance of folk music is of the utmost importance because it serves as proof that art has always flourished regardless of homogenous ideals and commercialism. Price proposes that a decentralization from Eurocentrism and recognition of folk music can "build up enthusiasm for the art which has been smothered by competition and 'too much' music." She felt that the best way to accomplish this was to spread a love of music in rural, less-congested parts of the country with community orchestras, bands, and other ensembles. Within these smaller communities, she believed, greater attention can be centered around folk music and other traditions that the current orchestral world refuses to embrace.

Florence Price directly advocates for the cultivation of a distinct American voice within 1932's *Piano Sonata in E Minor*, itself; however, her approach is by no means radical. For one, the *Sonata* is fairly traditional in its structure: composed of three movements in a fast-slow-fast orientation. Such a format was the standard for sonata composition, dating to the classical era compositions of Haydn and Mozart. In Price's *Sonata in E Minor*, the first movement is in a traditional sonata-allegro form: an exposition with two contrasting themes, one in E Minor, the second in the closely related C Major (the dominant of E Minor's relative G Major); a development in the dominant key of B Minor; and a recapitulation in E Minor. The second movement of the sonata is lyrical and song-like; the melody lilts and rocks back and forth over a

Romantic harmonic orientation: left hand chords and right hand repetition in-between the octave melody is reminiscent of Chopin's compositional techniques. The third movement is also Romantic in its sensibilities, with a sectional, expansive, and rhapsodic disposition, it is similar to the finales of several Beethoven sonatas, requiring dexterity and endurance.

Within her *Sonata*, Price strays from convention by directly advocating for the changes proposed in the 1947-50 diary entries: through direct incorporation of African-American spirituals, and the forging of a distinctly American voice through incorporation of domestic idioms. In the *Sonata*'s first movement, *Andante – Allegro*, the two main themes are composed with African American Spirituals in mind: their melodies are contained within a small range and they are composed with natural breaks for breaths. Similar melodies litter the second movement, *Andante*, which seem to lilt back and forth as a lullaby.

Price's use of rhythm borrows extensively from the African-American spiritual. They employ a short-long orientation (where the first note is shorter, and leads to the second) that calls to mind the tradition of ragtime, itself rooted in African American traditions. Born in the deep south following the period of American Reconstruction, ragtime, named for its syncopated or 'ragged' rhythm, was popularized by Black musicians like Scott Joplin (*Ballad of America*, 2021). His most popular compositions—*Maple Leaf Rag* or *The Entertainer*—employ the same rhythms that Florence Price so frequently uses in her *Sonata*. These include the main theme of the second movement, the first theme of the first movement, and the two interludes of the third movement's rondo.

The *Sonata* also borrows from the rhythmic characteristics of the cakewalk. Dating back to the pre-Civil War era, the cakewalk was a dance performed by slaves on plantations where the best dancers were given a decorated cake for a grand prize. It was lost on plantation owners, who

were also the judges of these events, that the dance was largely a mock of their behavior. The popularity of the dance grew as time went on, and its distinct syncopated rhythm⁶ was a staple of vaudeville and minstrelsy (Gandhi, 2013). Within the *Sonata*, this rhythm appears in the second theme and the development of the first movement as well as the main theme of the third movement (although compressed).

Of all the African-American idioms planted within the *Sonata in E Minor*, perhaps the most obvious is the direct quotation of a spiritual, “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.” The song, first appearing in print within 1867’s *Slave Songs of The United States*, was most likely sung by slaves on plantations as a means of hoping for a brighter tomorrow: the lyrics tell, “Sometimes I’m up, sometimes I’m down / Sometimes I’m almost to the ground ... / One day when I was walkin’ along / The sky opened up and love came down” (Ballad of America, 2019). Florence Price incorporates the chorus’ melody of “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen,” twice in the first movement: once in mm. 113-115, and again in mm. 275-277.

The direct incorporation of distinctly African-American musical traditions fulfill Price’s compositional goals as expressed in her 1947-50 diary entries. She achieves a distinctly American voice by honoring folk music and spirituals, not only by emulating them in her original melodies, but by directly incorporating African-American rhythms and spirituals themselves. The *Sonata in E Minor* is a prime example of this unique style, and is a testament to Price’s compositional brilliance.

The music of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms is some of the most beautiful ever composed, and Mozart concertos never fail to beguile me. But in sticking with the past, classical

⁶ Specifically, a traditional cakewalk is in four, with the adhering to the following rhythm: one, the “and” of two, and three.

music has little company as an artistic field that resists modernity. The majority of my undergraduate studies have been focused on music prior to the twentieth century, with the last hundred years' worth of music existing as an afterthought, or unintentionally tacked onto the year's curriculum. In literature or art, I am well-equipped to speak about the various movements of the 1900s, while the music of Arnold Schoenberg or Anton Webern (two pioneers of twentieth century music) is alien to me.

Of course, my own ignorance is at play: I would rather read a novel than analyze a Berg score, which to me, seems intentionally dense and abstruse. But in music there exists a body of work that is *not* alienating, that is in fact accessible, that seems to be ignored. I was elated to find Florence Price's work because it reminded me that modern art, specifically music, is not always a gatekept exploration of the unusual. Sometimes the modern borrows the techniques of the old and builds upon them.

When first selecting Florence Price as a subject of interest, the performing arts world is struggling to survive. Few attend concerts, and gaining a sizable, mainstream audience is a rarity. Rather than continue to perform and program largely the same music that has prevailed for hundreds of years, it is clear to me that changes need to be made, and that these changes can perhaps invite a larger and more diverse group of listeners. Programming Florence Price is an excellent starting point for allowing everyone a seat at the table, where all composers and their unique voices can be celebrated.

Resources

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