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New World: The rediscovery of Florence Price

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About this Person

Born: April 08, 1888 in Little Rock, Arkansas, United States

Died: June 03, 1953 in Chicago, Illinois, United States

Nationality: American

Occupation: Composer

Other Names: Price, Florence Beatrice; Smith, Florence; Price, Florence B.; Smith, Florence Beatrice

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New World

The rediscovery of Florence Price.

In 2009, Vicki and Darrell Gatwood, of St. Anne, Illinois, were preparing to renovate an abandoned house on the outskirts of town. The structure was in poor condition: vandals had ransacked it, and a fallen tree had torn a hole in the roof. In a part of the house that had remained dry, the Gatwoods made a curious discovery: piles of musical manuscripts, books, personal papers, and other documents. The name that kept appearing in the materials was that of Florence Price. The Gatwoods looked her up on the Internet, and found that she was a moderately well-known composer, based in Chicago, who had died in 1953. The dilapidated house had once been her summer home. The couple got in touch with librarians at the University of Arkansas, which already had some of Price's papers. Archivists realized, with excitement, that the collection contained dozens of Price scores that had been thought lost. Two of these pieces, the Violin Concertos Nos. 1 and 2, have recently been recorded by the Albany label: the soloist is Er-Gene Kahng, who is based at the University of Arkansas.

The reasons for the shocking neglect of Price's legacy are not hard to find. In a 1943 letter to the conductor Serge Koussevitzky, she introduced herself thus: "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." She plainly saw these factors as obstacles to her career, because she then spoke of Koussevitzky "knowing the worst." Indeed, she had a difficult time making headway in a culture that defined composers as white, male, and dead. One prominent conductor took up her cause—Frederick Stock, the German-born music director of the Chicago Symphony—but most others ignored her, Koussevitzky included. Only in the past couple of decades have Price's major works begun to receive recordings and performances, and these are still infrequent.

The musicologist Douglas Shadle, who has documented the vagaries of Price's career, describes her reputation as "spectral." She is widely cited as one of the first African-American classical composers to win national attention, and she was unquestionably the first black woman to be so recognized. Yet she is mentioned more often than she is heard. Shadle points out that the classical canon is rooted in "conscious selection performed by individuals in positions of power." Not only did Price fail to enter the canon; a large quantity of her music came perilously close to obliteration. That run-down house in St. Anne is a potent symbol of how a country can forget its cultural history.

Price was born in 1887, in Little Rock, Arkansas, and grew up in a middle-class household. She returned home after attending the New England Conservatory, one of the few conservatories that admitted African-Americans at the time. Her early adulthood was devoted largely to teaching and to raising a family. Life in Arkansas was oppressive; lynchings were routine. In 1927, Price moved with her family to Chicago, where her horizons began to expand. She divorced her husband, who had become abusive, and struck out on her own. Until then, her compositional output had consisted mostly of songs, short pieces, and music for children. She increasingly essayed larger symphonic and concerto forms, winning support from Stock, a conductor of rare broad-mindedness.

Beginning in 1931, Price wrote or sketched a total of four symphonies. The First and the Third have been published by A-R Editions, under the scholarly guidance of the late Rae Linda Brown, and recorded by the New Black Music Repertory Ensemble and the

Women's Philharmonic, respectively. The Second was apparently never finished; the Fourth, whose score turned up in the St. Anne house, will receive its premiere by the Fort Smith Symphony, in Arkansas, in May. These works are conservative in style, adhering to the template established by Dvořák in his Ninth Symphony, the unavoidable "New World," of 1893. Her melodies often follow the modal contour of African-American spirituals, avoiding the outre jazz touches that appear in contemporaneous scores by black and white composers alike. Yet a distinctive sensibility emerges in Price's pervasively elegant and subtle handling of familiar idioms.

In the First Symphony, Price is still finding her way; the harmonic writing sometimes falls back on nineteenth-century clichés, such as portentous diminished-seventh chords and insistent sequences in the Tchaikovsky manner. But her orchestration is arresting; she has a tendency to contrast tutti passages with spare, luminous writing for winds, showing a special feeling for the bassoon. The slow movement of the First achieves a hypnotic stillness, as the brass section repeatedly unfurls a stately chorale alongside a varied, kaleidoscopic accompaniment that includes African drums and cathedral chimes. The Third Symphony is a bigger, brasher work: a brooding brass opening smacks of Wagner, then begins shifting between Dvořákián hoedowns and hazy whole-tone harmonies. The music has a restless, quicksilver air, seldom staying in one mood for long: the almost kooky third movement is made up of a juba dance and a habanera. (On YouTube, there's a good performance by the Yale Symphony.)

Kahng's new recording of the Violin Concertos, with Ryan Cockerham conducting the Janeek Philharmonic, is Price's best outing on disk to date. Kahng plays the solo parts with lustrous tone and glistening facility. A few passages are so obviously indebted to famous Romantic concertos that one suspects Price of putting us on. The accompaniment keeps dancing around the expected, sidestepping into a bluesy progression here, a sultry dissonance there. The second concerto, which Price wrote in 1952, shortly before her death, begins with jarring chords of D major and F minor, establishing unstable harmonic terrain. The hyper-Romantic solo part now seems like a visitor from another world. This terse, beguiling piece has an autumnal quality reminiscent of the final works of Richard Strauss. It deserves to be widely heard.

The obvious objection that could be lodged against the modest Florence Price revival-Radio 3, the BBC classical station, will also participate by airing previously unheard Price works during an International Women's Day broadcast, on March 8th-is that the composer benefits from special pleading. If she were not black and a woman, would she be played? But other hypotheticals could be asked as well. If racism and misogyny had not so profoundly defined European and American culture, would as many white male composers have prospered? Granted, the repertory of older music cannot be drastically reengineered to reflect contemporary values. The idea is not to replace all performances of the "New World" with renditions of Price's symphonies and concertos. But her pieces warrant more attention than they are receiving now-especially from major orchestras. The same goes for neglected figures like Amy Beach, whose "Gaelic" Symphony (1896) packs a considerable punch, or William Dawson, whose "Negro Folk Symphony" (1934) is a brilliant, idiosyncratic creation.

In progressive musicological circles these days, you hear much talk about the canon and about the bad assumptions that underpin it. Classical music, perhaps more than any other field, suffers from what the acidulous critic-composer Virgil Thomson liked to call the "masterpiece cult." He complained about the idea of an "unbridgeable chasm between 'great work' and the rest of production . . . a distinction as radical as that recognized in theology between the elect and the damned." The adulation of the master, the genius, the divinely gifted creator all too easily lapses into a cult of the white-male hero, to whom such traits are almost unthinkingly attached.

I feel some ambivalence about the anti-masterpiece line. Having grown up with the notion of musical genius, I am reluctant to let it go entirely. What I value most as a listener is the sense of a singular creative personality coalescing from anonymous sounds. I wonder whether the profile of genius could simply evolve to include a broader range of personalities and faces. But there's no doubt that the jargon of greatness has become musty, and more than a little toxic. I recently had a social-media exchange with the Harvard-based scholar Anne Shreffler, who wrote of instilling different values in her classes. She said, "Instead of telling students it's Great, you can say it's worth their while: historically fascinating, well crafted, genre bending, or just listen-to-this-amazing-moment-at-the-end. Rather than a religious icon." If we are going to treat music as a full-fledged art form-and, surprisingly often, we don't-we need to be open to the bewildering richness of everything that has been written during the past thousand years. To reduce music history to a pageant of masters is, at bottom, lazy. We stick with the known in order to avoid the hard work of exploring the unknown.

The anachronisms in Florence Price's music are, in the end, no flaw. Listening to her, I have the uncanny sense of hearing the symphonies and operas that women and African-Americans were all but barred from writing during the Romantic heyday, when the busts on the piano were being carved. She seems to speak from an imaginary past, from an alternative history of an America that lived up to its stated ideals. Frederick Douglass, in his great speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?," said, "We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future." In music, too, we can use the past to build a less imperfect world.

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