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FLORENCE BEATRICE SMITH PRICE: Breakthrough Composer (1887-1953)

Author: Melissa Tucker

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Born in Little Rock in 1887, Florence Beatrice Smith Price had an uncommon childhood in the post-Emancipation era when African-American families were beginning to thrive. Her father was born in Delaware and became Chicago's first black dentist. When the fire of 1871 devastated his offices, he relocated to Little Rock where he was again, the first black dentist. Her mother was a teacher in Indiana, and once in Arkansas with her husband, became a very active businesswoman. They were both pillars of the community.

However, African-American travelers still had trouble finding hotel accommodations, so her parents would often host well-known visitors, such as abolitionist Frederick Douglass, and traveling performers like pianist Blind Boone.

Florence was a gifted musician, even at a young age, and her parents encouraged her to perform and learn. But by 1891, with the passage of Jim Crow laws, race relations began to deteriorate. Her father's dental practice was segregated, and so were public schools. In 1903, Florence graduated from the segregated Capitol Hill School as class valedictorian. She wanted to continue to study music but her options were limited. The New England Conservatory in Boston - one of the top music schools in the world - accepted black students, and she enrolled at the age of 16. She was encouraged to pursue music composition as well as performance, and her extraordinary musical talent got her private lessons with the Conservatory director. In her graduating class of 58 students, she was the only one to earn two degrees, in piano and organ performance, and teaching.

Following graduation, she became a teacher and eventually worked her way to department chair at Clark University in Atlanta. In 1912, she returned to Little Rock, where she met and married a young lawyer from Connecticut named Thomas Price. They had three children, a son and two daughters. Despite her impressive resume, Florence was denied membership in the Arkansas State Music Teachers Association because of her race. She continued composing teaching pieces as well as larger concert works, which she entered in national music competitions.

But through the 1920s, the situation for African-American residents in Little Rock became increasingly dangerous. Violence became more common, and the 1927 lynching of John Carter on Ninth Street in Little Rock terrified the black community. Fearing for their safety, the Price family moved to Chicago that year.

Florence Price's musical career flourished in Chicago. In 1932, she won first place in the Rodman Wanamaker Music Competition for her Symphony in E Minor. Her piano sonata also won first prize in the piano category. Her winning symphony caught the attention of Chicago Symphony Orchestra conductor Frederick Stock, and he premiered her work during the Chicago World's Fair in 1933. She was also invited to attend symphony rehearsals to advance her skills in orchestration and composition.

While living in Chicago, Price met acclaimed African-American opera singer Marian Anderson. Price composed more than 50 original songs for Anderson. In 1939, the Daughters of the American Revolution would not allow Anderson to perform in Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. This decision led to backlash that caused first lady Eleanor Roosevelt to withdraw her membership in the organization. The performance was relocated to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, where 75,000 were in attendance. Anderson performed a voice recital, including "My Soul's Been Anchored in the Lord," by Florence Price.

By the 1930s, Price was recognized on a national scale, but by the 40s, she had difficulty getting her concert pieces published, which limited performance opportunities. She petitioned the Boston Symphony to perform one of her pieces, but the conductor never responded to her letters.

She composed more than 300 works in her lifetime, including chamber music, choral works and solo vocal compositions, and commercial jingles for radio. Her style draws on her study of classical European music, and her African-American musical heritage of gospel, blues, spirituals, and jazz.

"Whether writing for orchestra, voice, solo piano, or chamber music, Price's melodies, harmonies, and rhythms command attention and speak to the heart," said Linda Holzer, professor of music at the University of Arkansas. "And she was a model of perseverance and determination. [Her biographer Dr. Rae Linda] Brown put it this way, 'Florence Price walked on ground no other black woman had trod.'"

In 1950, she was invited to compose an overture for an English conductor in Manchester to be performed the next year.

"Ultimately, she became the first African-American woman composer to earn an international reputation for her work, when she was commissioned by Britain's Sir John Barbirolli," Holzer said.

Price planned to attend the performance but an extended illness prevented her from traveling. She died of a heart attack in 1953 and was buried in Chicago's Lincoln Cemetery in an unmarked grave. In 1964, a Chicago elementary school was renamed in her honor. Her daughters donated their mother's papers to Special Collections at Mullins Library at UA Fayetteville. Additional manuscripts, books and other papers belonging to Price were discovered in an abandoned Illinois home in 2009, and those works were secured by the University of Arkansas. Violin Concertos Nos. 1 and No 2, contained within the findings, were recorded by University of Arkansas at Fayetteville professor of violin, Er-Gene Kahng with the Janacek Philharmonic in the Czech Republic. The BBC symphony orchestra performed one of her "lost" compositions in London in March 2018. Holzer performed Price's piano sonata in Vienna as a guest of the U.S. Embassy in Austria the following May. Price has also been the subject of February 2018 articles in the New York Times and the New Yorker. A documentary film about her life and music has aired on PBS affiliate stations as well as at film festivals in the United States and in the United Kingdom.

"Florence Price was a gifted pianist-composer, in the tradition of Beethoven, Brahms, and Rachmaninoff. Her music is inspiring to play, and feels good in the hands. She connected with leading artists of her day, drew on the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance, and composed American music with tremendous beauty," Holzer said.

"Once published scores of her concert works became more readily available in 1998 and rediscovered manuscripts were published after 2009, it opened the door to more opportunities for performers to share her music with audiences again."

What's one thing women can learn from her story? "Believe in yourself, pursue the best educational opportunities you can, find your creative voice, and express yourself!" said Linda Holzer, professor of music at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

BY MELISSA TUCKER

1887: Born in Little Rock

1903: Graduated as valedictorian from the segregated Capitol Hill School in Little Rock

1906: Graduated with honors from the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. Returned to Arkansas

1932: Won first place in the Rodman Wanamaker Music Competition for her Symphony in E Minor

1933: Became the first African-American female composer to have a composition performed by a major American symphony orchestra when Symphony in E Minor, was given its world premiere by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1933

1939: Singer Marian Anderson performed "My Soul's Been Anchored in the Lord," written by Florence Price, for an audience of 75,000 people in Washington, D.C.

1950: Commissioned by Britain's Sir John Barbirolli to compose an overture and became the first African-American woman to earn an international reputation for her compositions

1953: Died of a heart attack in Chicago

1964: Chicago elementary school renamed in her honor

2009: Price's lost manuscripts were discovered in an abandoned Illinois home; those works were secured by the University of Arkansas

Caption: PHOTO: Florence Price Collection, (MC988), Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

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