

Florence B. Price

1887-1953

Classical composer

Florence B. Price was the first African-American woman to become famous as a composer of orchestral music. Beginning her career at a time when it was unheard-of for blacks to study classical composition, she became one of the founders of a tradition of African-American music in the twentieth-century classical arena. Her more than 300 completed works included symphonies and other orchestral works, choral pieces (some of them arrangements of spirituals), songs, piano and organ works, and music for small ensembles. Orchestras in several major American cities and even abroad performed Price's crowd-pleasing works.

Price was born Florence Beatrice Smith in Little Rock, Arkansas, on April 9, 1887. Her father, James, the son of free blacks from Delaware, was a dentist, and her mother, Florence, had taught music in Indianapolis before her marriage. Young Florence Smith and her brother and sister all took music lessons from their mother, and Florence emerged as the prodigy of the group. She gave her first performance on the piano at age four, and she attended the same elementary school as another black classical pioneer, William Grant Still; one of their teachers had dreamed of becoming a composer but had been frustrated in her efforts to find the money for a musical education. Before she was named valedictorian of her segregated high school in Little Rock, Price had published her first compositions.

Enrolling at the New England Conservatory of Music, Price studied piano and organ with the aim of becoming a music teacher. But she also sought out lessons

from the school's composition faculty, which included some of the leading composers of the day. One of them, George Whitefield Chadwick, had taken to heart the advice of Czech composer Antonín Dvořák that African-American materials might form the basis for a distinctively American musical style, and he is thought to have encouraged Price to incorporate black folk styles into her music. Her compositions from her student years included a string quartet and a symphony. Price graduated from the New England Conservatory in 1906.

She taught keyboards at the Cotton Plant-Arkadelphia Academy and at North Little Rock's Shorter College for four years, continuing to compose when she had the time. Some of her songs caught the attention of white Memphis composer Neumon Leighton, who encouraged her by assigning them to his voice students. She then moved to Atlanta to head the music department at Clark University. In 1912 she married lawyer Thomas J. Price. Price raised two children, and for several years giving private lessons occupied most of her musical energy. But she continued writing songs, one of which commemorated her stillborn son, and in the 1920s several of them won contest awards. The family fled the increasing violence of southern apartheid for Chicago in 1927.

That city offered Price the opportunity to follow her dreams as a composer. She immediately enrolled at several local educational institutions, among them the American Conservatory of Music and the Chicago Musical College, and she made contact with and learned from both white classical composers such as

At a Glance . . .

Born on April 9, 1887, in Little Rock, AR; died on June 3, 1953, in Chicago, IL; daughter of James (a dentist) and Florence (a music teacher) Smith; married Thomas J. Price, a lawyer, 1912; two children. *Education:* Graduated from New England Conservatory of Music, 1906; further study in composition with George Whitefield Chadwick; studied at Chicago Musical College and American Conservatory of Music, mid-1920s.

Career: Performed in public on piano at age four; taught music at Cotton Plant-Arkadelphia Academy, 1906-07; taught at Shorter College, Little Rock, 1907-10; head of music department, Clark College, Atlanta, GA, 1910-12; Symphony in E minor premiered by Chicago Symphony Orchestra, 1933; taught piano and composition privately in Chicago; Symphony No. 3 in C minor premiered, 1940; *Songs to the Dark Virgin*, song cycle, published 1941.

Memberships: American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP).

Selected awards: Four Wanamaker Prizes (first prize for Symphony in E minor), 1932.

Leo Sowerby, and leading black figures such as the popular composer Will Marion Cook and the prominent arranger of spirituals William Dawson. With her marriage going sour, Price had to struggle to make ends meet; at one point the middle-aged Price moved in with her student Margaret Bonds, who later became a noted pianist and composer. Writing music for radio commercials and accompanying silent films on the organ brought in some extra cash.

Things began to improve after several of Price's short piano pieces were published, and in 1932 she made her breakthrough with four prizes in the prestigious Wanamaker Prize competition. The Chicago Symphony under conductor Frederick Stock performed Price's Symphony in E minor the following year at the Chicago World's Fair—the first time a symphony by a black woman had been performed by a major orchestra. Price herself performed her Piano Concerto in D minor in 1934 with the Chicago Women's Symphony, and over the next decade various works by Price appeared on the programs of orchestras around the Midwest. She wrote four symphonies in all, but no copy of the second is known to have survived. Price's large

body of choral music, some of which was intended for choruses that performed on Chicago radio station WGN, is little known today.

Price's style, wrote Eileen Southern in *The Music of Black Americans*, "is best defined as neoromantic, which was rather conservative for her time. She was also a black nationalist in that she drew freely upon folk idioms in her compositions." Unlike other black composers of the day, Price rarely quoted spirituals or other existing melodies from the African-American tradition in her work—although her 1929 *Fantasia Nègre* was based on the spiritual "Sinner, Please Don't Let This Harvest Pass." Instead, as Price herself wrote on occasion, she strove toward a more general African-American sound; many of her works use pre-jazz dance rhythms (such as the "juba" rhythm of slave secular music), and she sometimes used such characteristically African-American techniques as call and response.

It was not until the 1970s and 1980s brought widespread rediscovery of classical works by women and by earlier black composers that Price's music was recorded and gained widespread repeat performances. By 2002 over 20 of Price's works had been recorded. At one point during her own lifetime, however, Price did gain her proverbial 15 minutes of fame—when pioneering African-American soprano Marian Anderson performed her setting of Langston Hughes's *Songs to the Dark Virgin*, the *Chicago Daily News* (as quoted in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*) opined that the work was "one of the greatest immediate successes ever won by an American song."

Anderson's performance led to publication of the Hughes setting in 1941, which in turn inspired further performances of Price's songs by such leading vocalists as Leontyne Price, Roland Hayes, and William Warfield. That stimulated a new round of interest from music publishers in Price's music, especially her art songs. Price was inducted into the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers in 1940; her membership was sponsored by composer John Alden Carpenter. Further recognition of her talent came from abroad; the durable British orchestral conductor Sir John Barbirolli commissioned a suite for strings from Price, and it was premiered under his baton in Manchester, England. Price continued to compose and perform until her death in Chicago on June 3, 1953, from a stroke.

Selected works

At the Cotton Gin, for piano, 1928.
Symphony in E minor, 1932.
Sonata in E minor, for piano, 1932.
Piano Concerto in F minor, 1934.
Symphony No. 3 in C minor, 1940.
Songs to the Dark Virgin, song cycle, texts by Langston Hughes, pub. 1941.

Sources

Books

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On-line

<http://allclassical.com>

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—James M. Manheim