

Seen and Heard International

Two forces to be reckoned with debut at Blossom: Florence Price and Michelle Cann

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by Mark Jordan

United States Blossom Music Festival [1], An American Celebration: Michelle Cann (piano), Cleveland Orchestra / Brett Mitchell (conductor), Blossom Music Center, Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, 4.7.2021. (MSJ)

Bernstein – *Candide*, Overture

Watkins – ‘Soul of Remembrance’ from Five Movements in Color

Price – Concerto in One Movement (for piano and orchestra)

Hailstork – ‘An American Fanfare’

Copland – *Appalachian Spring*, Suite

Tchaikovsky – *The Year 1812 Solemn Overture*

Sousa – ‘The Stars and Stripes Forever’

In 2009, a couple in St. Anne, Illinois, started renovating an abandoned house that had been vandalized and punctured by a falling tree. As they worked on the dilapidated structure, Vicki and Darrell Gatwood kept finding music manuscripts strewn about the place. The name on some of the pages was Florence Price, a previous owner of the house, who had died in 1953.

Instead of pitching the papers, the Gatwoods went in search of Florence Price, and realized they had a trove of scores by a once-prominent musician, the first African-American female to have her works played by a major American orchestra. They got in touch with researchers from the University of Arkansas, Price’s birth state, and the important collection was saved.

One of the pieces in this mass of papers was Price’s Concerto in One Movement for piano and orchestra, which was premiered in 1938 by the Chicago Symphony, with Frederick Stock conducting and Price herself as soloist. It marks the peak of Price’s career and demonstrates why her music is worth reviving. And it was the highlight of the Cleveland Orchestra’s first concert in 15 months, following the height of the covid pandemic.

The revival of a forgotten work calls for an advocate with the power to persuade, and the concerto had it in Michelle Cann, a professor at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia (and previously a graduate of the Cleveland Institute of Music). Cann has taken a special interest in the music of Florence Price and clearly believes in it. Beyond that advocacy, Cann also happens to be a masterful player with a commanding presence.

The concerto, while described as being in one continuous movement, is in three sections, fast-slow-fast, corresponding to the traditional movements. For a piece written in the 1930s, the opening section is surprisingly old-fashioned. But the context in which it was composed is important: having gotten a foot in the door through winning a composition prize, Price had to prove her mettle against what was bound to be a slew of skeptics, both misogynistic and racist.

To show she could write traditional classical music, Price produced a Brahmsian essay with dark and majestic cascades of piano notes. For three quarters of the section, it could have been written fifty years earlier. Then, near the end, there is a quiet but electrifying passage full of more modern harmonies before a recap of the main flourish. It is almost as if Price were saying, 'There, I've shown you I can do traditional European classical music, but don't you dare think that's all I can do'.

Delivering on that promise, the slow movement is drawn from the world of spirituals and blues. While Michelle Cann delivered the grand manner like a force of nature in the first section, here her piano sang, and the soul of Florence Price took flight. One eagerly hopes it won't be the last time we have the opportunity to hear such soaring melody. Of special joy was the exchange of solos between Cann and oboist Frank Rosenwein. With cameras projecting a closeup of Rosenwein on the large video screens, audience members could see how closely the oboist watched both conductor and soloist to perfectly coordinate his rapturous solos with them.

The final section was as joyous a piece of Americana as any Joplin rag or Gershwin song. Based on the traditional African-American juba dance style, it was a stomp that Cann relished, and it instantly brought the audience to its feet. She followed with an encore, the moving and lyrical slow movement of Price's Piano Sonata in E minor.

Cann was supported warmly by the Cleveland Orchestra under guest conductor Brett Mitchell on this opening weekend of concerts at the Blossom Music Festival. It was a perfect example of why the performance of live music matters, and one hopes it was recorded and will be released by the Cleveland Orchestra, for this was important music in an important performance that needs to be heard. The reasons are multiple: a world recovering from global catastrophe should hear the hope and joy of a rediscovered voice; the United States in particular must deal with its legacy of smothering and forgetting the artistic voices of minorities and women; and classical music needs all these things plus the urgency of advocates like Michelle Cann and this orchestra. May this be only the first visit by Cann, who has such warmth and power in her playing that she would surely prove a rewarding guest in other repertoire, too.

Conductor Brett Mitchell, who has a long history with the Cleveland Orchestra as assistant, associate and guest conductor, had started the concert with a rather laid-back version of Leonard Bernstein's overture to *Candide*, perhaps spaciouly paced to allow the work's sparkling lines to register in the reverberant acoustic of the Blossom Music Center's pavilion, made even more resonant by the socially-distanced seating of audience members (though the lawn was packed with what must have been a record crowd for an orchestra concert).

Mary J. Watkins's 'Soul of Remembrance' was another of the three works on the program by African-American composers. It is a solemn balance of spiritual-inspired lyricism over a steadily tolling slow march, and is one of the sections of Watkins's *Five Movements of Color*. Mitchell introduced the piece with a moment of silence and dedicated it to the memory of those lost in the pandemic.

The second half of the concert opened with Adolphus Hailstork's 'An American Fanfare', his response to Aaron Copland's 'Fanfare for the Common Man'. Though not as interesting as some of Hailstork's larger orchestral works, it was a great showpiece for the Cleveland Orchestra brass, which as a section is the strongest it has ever been.

Copland's Appalachian Spring suite was given a sure-handed performance under Mitchell's baton, and even the *1812 Overture* and 'The Stars and Stripes Forever' were played passionately in a concert where the musicians were clearly delighted to be on stage, and the listeners were overjoyed to have them there once again.

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