



## Florence Price in NACO program proves unforgettable

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by Natasha Gauthier

It shouldn't be exceptional, in this year of our Lord 2021, for a symphony concert program to feature women of colour as conductor, instrumental soloist and two of its three composers. Yet here we are.

A deep dive into the archives would confirm, but it appears that the National Arts Centre Orchestra concert of Oct. 30 represented just such a first for the organization. African American pianist Michelle Cann joined Hong Kong conductor Xian Zhang for the Piano Concerto by African American composer Florence Price. Zhang also conducted the orchestral version of African Japanese American composer and violist Nokuthula Ngwenyama's *Primal Message*.

Ngwenyama originally wrote *Primal Message* in 2018 as a string quintet. The Detroit Symphony premiered the orchestral version with Zhang last year but owing to the pandemic, this was Ngwenyama's first time hearing the expanded work live in a concert hall. The composer was inspired by the Arecibo Message—a message about Earth and its inhabitants radioed into space in 1974—and built the structure around the prime number sequence 2-3-5-7. For all its scientific source material, *Primal Message* is ravishingly expressive rather than cerebral; its interior math, while rigorous, never draws attention to itself. Ngwenyama's concept of space is comforting, not cold. Warm, gently lilting melodies in the lower strings play against high, shimmering, starlit effects in the violins. Percussion figures prominently but I found the orchestration for this section overly dense; the rhythmic lines are at times too thickly underlined and the sonorities can clash rather than contrast with the sophisticated, subtle writing for the strings.

The classical music establishment has made much of its so-called “rediscovery” of Florence Price over the past few years. Between works, Zhang chatted onstage with NACO bassist Marjolaine Fournier, and she used an adjective heard frequently with Price's name: forgotten. But it's doing Price's legacy a disservice not to specify exactly who did the forgetting, and why. After all, as musicologists have noted, Price has been cherished and performed continuously in the African American music community for decades.

It's not a stretch to posit that had Price's Piano Concerto in One Movement been written by a white man, it would likely be as much a part of the standard repertoire as Gershwin's Concerto in F. Clocking in at under 20 minutes, Price's concerto is tight and lean as a greyhound's flank. There's no bloat or excess anywhere, just three dazzlingly well-developed, eloquent sections. Price's enormous skill means that although the journey is efficient, the listener never feels rushed. The opening movement's surging, turbulent themes flow into a

bucolic second movement that begins with a tender, intimate dialogue between the piano and solo oboe (lovingly played by principal Charles Hamann). The exuberant, spiritually uplifting final section is based on the Juba, a traditional “patting and slapping” dance originally performed by enslaved Black people in the American South.

Cann has been among the most passionate advocates for the wider programming of Price’s music in recent years. She’s technically fearless, with a bold attack and an enormous, rich sound, and she powered through Price’s numerous challenges with aplomb. But even more than Cann’s virtuosity, it was her joyous, lit-from-within energy that connected with the audience, and nobody could be faulted for the spontaneous burst of applause after her fire-and-brimstone playing in the first movement. Zhang conducted with her usual superior clarity, crisp rhythms and astonishingly precise tonal palette.

Zhang is an absolute wizard when it comes to balancing and adjusting the orchestra in the tiniest of increments, a skill that resulted in a gleaming, elegant, masterfully nuanced reading of Mozart’s Symphony No. 39. In particular, Zhang’s ability to frame the woodwinds in a delicate, golden filigree of strings is pure magic.

Let’s hope that representation like this (even the excellent program notes were by a woman, the Canadian musicologist Hannah Chan-Hartley) becomes the norm rather than the exception.

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