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Florence Price's 'Piano Concerto' is a knockout in Philadelphia Orchestra's first performance

Pianist Michelle Cann is exquisite in the Digital Stage concert featuring the original orchestration of Price's stunning work.

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by Peter Dobrin

There are more than a few astonishing aspects to [Florence Price](#) and her *Piano Concerto in One Movement*, starting with the fact that a Black woman in 1930s America managed to get her work noticed and performed by the classical music establishment.

But the thing that strikes me after listening to the concerto more than a dozen times is how much it says in so short a span. Listeners marvel at the concentrated musical language Beethoven used in some of his late works. But here is Price moving from storm to carefree summer idyll to ecstatic joy — so deftly, with so many other more subtle emotional messages along the way — in well under 20 minutes. The sense of discovery is such that the work creates the odd sensation of being a slightly different piece every time you hear it.

The great artistic coup of this week's Philadelphia Orchestra Digital Stage presentation of the concerto is that although the work has been recorded before, a more stirring and authoritative performance may not exist. It sets a standard. Much of the credit goes to pianist [Michelle Cann](#), recently named to the [Eleanor Sokoloff](#) chair in piano studies at the Curtis Institute of Music, who is exquisite in both the Liszt-like technical sparkle and probing humanity of Price's writing.

It's worth taking a moment to pause on the number of bells this marriage of creative forces might have rung for Sokoloff, who died in July at age 106. The longtime Curtis piano professor was outspoken on the difficulties experienced by women in the solo-pianist realm. She would have thrilled to a female piano professor playing the work of an overlooked female composer and piano soloist.

The concerto's journey has been a circuitous one. It was well-received at its premiere in 1934, but at some point it disappeared, along with the original orchestration. In 2011, composer Trevor Weston created a reconstruction from a two-piano manuscript and a few remaining instrumental parts, and his is a mighty and convincing version.

But a manuscript of the original orchestration turned up at auction in 2019, and two Cornell University music professors, Tamara Acosta and Stephen Spinelli, pitched the orchestra on the idea of programming the concerto in collaboration with their [ONEcomposer](#) project.

The orchestra accepted, but work didn't end there. Comparing the newly published original score, two-piano score, and Weston's version, Spinelli and Acosta found more than 100 discrepancies or errors — wrong notes and other questionable markings — and, working with Philadelphia Orchestra librarian [Nicole Jordan](#), resolved them.

This performance is the first in North America since, possibly, as far back as the 1930s, the orchestra says, and although there is much to love in Weston's version, the original orchestration has virtues that sharpen the artistic vision. The original uses a generally lighter orchestration, making for some crystalline moments, and yet it remains incredibly powerful.

The sense of peril of the first section comes both by way of full-blooded orchestral textures as well as the delicate doubling of flute and strings. In the serene second section, where the orchestra joins in a dialogue with piano in Weston's orchestration, the original has the dovetailing going on between just piano and oboe (played here by Peter Smith). There's a lovely simplicity to it.

Melodies recalling Black spirituals weave in and out, and the third section brings a Juba, a dance with African roots developed by enslaved people on Southern plantations. Cann and the orchestra, with Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducting, take a fast tempo, heightening the feeling of emotional release.

An energetic burst opens the orchestra's hour-long concert: Rossini's *Overture to La scala di seta* (*The Silken Ladder*). The transparent writing of the slow section gives listeners a chance to hear the orchestra's able winds handing off material from one to the next, with particular focus on principal oboist [Philippe Tondre](#). The strings are, in fact, silky and light. Nézet-Séguin shapes transitional phrases in a particularly subtle and lovely way.

Schubert's *Symphony No. 4*, "*Tragic*," is the longest piece on the program, and next to Price's score, it doesn't exactly come across as concise. Still, Nézet-Séguin and the orchestra differentiate between the sweet and agitated sections of the second movement with particular effectiveness. If it's a feeling of supreme contentment you're looking for — and who isn't? — you'll find it here.

The Philadelphia Orchestra's Digital Stage program of works by Rossini, Price, and Schubert streams Thursday at 8 p.m. and is available through Feb. 25 at 11 p.m. Tickets are \$15 or \$17. [philorch.org](#).

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