



Florence Price: Obscure Composer Restored To Light

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by John W. Lambert

RALEIGH, N.C. – Look up [Florence Price](#) in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1980), the standard reference work for a whole generation of critics, and you'll find a photo of Leontyne with a short article on the singer but no biography of the composer. Even today, knowledgeable performers and aficionados are not likely to know her name. But the times, they are a-changin'; the lady and her music are finally coming into their own.

She had three strikes against her – maybe four. She was black. She was female. She wrote “classical” music. And she was from Arkansas. Born in 1887, young Florence played in a recital at age 4, had her first work published at 11, and was high school valedictorian three years later. At [New England Conservatory](#), she passed as Mexican. Segregated Little Rock was home till 1927, when life there became more difficult. In Chicago, she attained recognition within just a few years.

As the [FlorencePrice.org](#) website puts it, “Florence Beatrice (Smith) Price became the first black female composer to have a symphony performed by a major American orchestra when Music Director [Frederick Stock](#) and the [Chicago Symphony Orchestra](#) played the world premiere of her Symphony No. 1 in E minor on June 15, 1933, on one of four concerts presented at the Auditorium Theatre from June 14 through June 17 during Chicago’s [Century of Progress Exposition](#). The historic June 15th concert, entitled ‘The Negro in Music,’ also included works by [Harry T. Burleigh](#), [Roland Hayes](#), [Samuel Coleridge-Taylor](#), and [John Alden Carpenter](#), performed by [Margaret A. Bonds](#), pianist, and tenor Roland Hayes with the orchestra. Florence Price’s symphony had come to the attention of Stock when it won first prize in the prestigious Wanamaker Competition held the previous year.”

But after that, the barriers became, with few exceptions, increasingly insurmountable, and after she died in 1953, she was largely forgotten. Fast forward to 2018 and [a remarkable article by Alex Ross in *The New Yorker*](#), that recounts the quite miraculous rediscovery of a cache of Price’s music in 2009, in a dilapidated house in St. Anne, Ill., that had been the composer’s summer home. (There’s more information [here](#).)

Among the treasures discovered there was a Concerto in One Movement for piano and orchestra that is now being championed by Philadelphia-based pianist [Michelle Cann](#), who brought it to Chapel Hill and Raleigh for three performances with the [North Carolina Symphony](#). Returning to this podium for his third visit was the distinguished, no-nonsense music director of the [Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra](#), [Miguel Harth-Bedoya](#). (For a review on *Classical Voice North America* of his conducting of the opening concert of the SHIFT Festival in Washington, D.C., earlier this year, go [here](#).)

Price's concerto was composed in 1933 and premiered in June 1934 at the [Chicago Musical College](#), where she was a graduate student. By the time it was rediscovered, the full score and portions of some instrumental parts apparently had been lost. The NCS presented a reconstruction from Price's piano reduction score of the work by [Trevor Weston](#), a composer (and professor of music at Drew in Madison, N. J.) in his own right who seems to be following in the footsteps of the great [T.J. Anderson](#), a pioneer researcher in the rediscovery of significant items from African-American musical history. Price's concerto was re-introduced in 2011 by [Karen Walwyn](#). Her admirable recording for Albany is available [on YouTube](#).

Cann owns this piece now, and experiencing her interpretation of the captivating score was a highlight of the first of the Raleigh, N.C., performances, heard in [Meymandi Concert Hall](#) on Nov. 16. Nominally in one movement, it falls into three distinct sections in performance. It's big, romantic, and immediately appealing, containing infusions of music that suggest Dvořák at the outset but moves into spiritual-like evocations ("Give Me Jesus" came immediately to mind) and concludes with an infectious and joyous dance. "Rachmaninoff with an American accent," one enthusiastic listener opined. That hits the mark very nicely.

The performance was stunning in its beauty at all levels, ranging from the superb pianism of the soloist to the magic Harth-Bedoya elicited from the NCS's stellar winds, brasses, and strings. Balance is the key to successful renditions of music like this Price concerto, particularly during concerts by regional orchestras with not quite enough strings – this one has 44 listed in its program out of a total complement of 70 or so. The substantial audience clearly sensed the importance of the music and the collective realization of it, rewarding the players with a standing ovation.

The concert began with a noble reading of Beethoven's *Leonore* Overture No. 3 and ended with Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* Symphony, both led from memory. ([Harth-Bedoya had led the Fifth Symphony](#) during one of his previous stints with the NCS. Here's a vote for either of the other *Leonore* Overtures the next time.) His approach was notable for a general absence of flamboyance in terms of gesture and aural realization. These were basically straightforward interpretations one might characterize as honest music-making.

It was evident that the work had all been done in the markings – the conductor had brought his own pre-marked parts of these thrice-familiar scores from Texas – and in the rehearsal, so Harth-Bedoya basically guided the proceedings and let the instrumentalists *play*. How refreshing! The crowd responded accordingly at the conclusions of both pieces and only briefly interrupted the flow of the Tchaikovsky at the end of the march. Progress!

Both guest artists participated in pre-concert remarks. And pianist Cann was in town for the week, doing outreach here and there, including a mini-recital appearance at North Carolina's [Governor Morehead School for the Blind](#) that she described with infectious excitement.

Best of all, on the very day of the first of these NCS performances, [G. Schirmer announced](#) its acquisition of worldwide rights to Price's catalog, a news release further amplified in [a feature article by Michael Cooper](#) in the *New York Times*.

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<https://classicalvoiceamerica.org/2018/11/19/florence-price-obscure-composer-restored-to-light/>