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Michelle Cann Finds Her Calling Card

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CHICAGO—As recently as a decade ago, Michelle Cann, like many classical music lovers, didn't know who Florence Price was.

A friend set her straight in 2016, sending along Price's *Fantasies nègres*. As Cann told a rapt audience at the University of Chicago's Logan Center on Jan. 24, she'd never learned about any Black women composers or classical performers in her studies at the Cleveland and Curtis institutes of Music. (She now teaches at the latter.) Now, Price is, in Cann's words, "beyond an inspiration"—and her music has ushered in a new chapter of the pianist's career.



Michelle Cann performs the music of Florence Price and other Black female composers in Chicago

In the parlance of the Bard Music Festival, one cannot know Price without knowing her world. Cann explored exactly that, centering her milieu on mid-20th-century Chicago. In engaging and enthusiastic interstitial comments, Cann connected Price's career to that of other Black women working in Chicago classical music, both before and after her. For example, Irene Britton Smith, who spent much of her career as a music teacher in Chicago Public Schools, sent fan mail and a few scores to Price; to her amazement, the older composer responded effusively and urged her to keep composing. Margaret Bonds—a composer whose music is often paired with Price's, and which Cann has also recorded — performed as a soloist on the 1933 Chicago Symphony concert that famously featured Price's Symphony No. 1. At a time when Price was down on her luck, she even lived with the Bonds family, mentoring the teenage Margaret.

History has not documented whether Betty Jackson King, the youngest composer featured on the program, ever met Price. However, she passed through the same institutions, getting a degree from Roosevelt University's Chicago Musical College and becoming president of the National Association of Negro Musicians (NANM). Nora Holt, a composer and pianist who preceded them all, was also a onetime NANM president who used her perch as the *Chicago Defender's* music critic to advocate for Price's music.

British scholar/pianist Samantha Ege has already outlined these connections in recital locally, as well as in her recent book *South Side Impresarios*. In comparison, Cann's comments could be fuzzy on details, approximating some dates and other facts. But her musicianship in this repertoire is peerless on today's concert circuit. She imbued Bonds's *Spiritual Suite* with uncommon color and lyrical ease, her hands swapping melodic lines seamlessly. Holt's *Negro Dance*, one of just two of her surviving works, has scarcely sounded as doted upon as it did under Cann's poetic touch.

Cann also brought some of the Price *Fantasies*—Nos. 2 and 1, in that order. Most of the *Fantasies* recall spirituals without quoting a specific melody verbatim; the refrain of No. 2, for example, bears a passing resemblance to "Go Down Moses" but avoids its exact contour. No. 1 is the only *Fantasia* that adapts a specific spiritual: "Sinner, Please Don't Let This Harvest Pass." Rather than introduce the piece, Cann stood with her eyes closed in silence onstage for a few moments before singing the spiritual *a cappella*, her voice a plummy, marrow-deep contralto. Then, wordlessly, she migrated to the piano for the *Fantasia* itself, explosively virtuosic and bubbling with Liszt-ian chromaticism.

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Yet another unexpected delight came in the form of King's *Four Seasonal Sketches* and Smith's *Variations on a Theme by MacDowell*. Both composers tend to get a bit overshadowed by Price and Bonds in discourse and programming. But Cann's variegated accounts were welcome correctives. The *Seasonal Sketches* begin with a bucolic "Spring Intermezzo," tinged with Impressionist pentatonicism; Cann rendered the fading left-hand figures as the fading tolls of bells. "Summer Interlude" is languorous, before detouring into scowling intensity. The fugue in "Autumn Dance" evokes a jolly Slavic country dance then melds into clashing close-voiced chords. Cann's brooding left-hand register underpinned "Winter Holiday" with a certain bleakness. Smith's ten *MacDowell Variations* are also character pieces, each filtering Edward MacDowell's *Air and Rigaudon* through the lens of a certain composer or era. The second variation nods to the French Baroque, cast in a swaying 6/8, and the third the fleet counterpoint of a Bach invention. There are also different flavors of Romanticism, from the Rachmaninoff-ian fourth and ninth variations to the Chopin-esque fifth and seventh.



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Speaking of Rachmaninoff, Cann offered his C-sharp minor Prelude as an encore — or so it seemed, until, after the first two phrases, it erupted into a bouncy stride riff. This was not Rachmaninoff but jazz pianist Hazel Scott's "Prelude." The jazzy showpiece is a favorite encore of Cann's, and it's easy to see why. The incandescent miniature briefly romps through Beethoven's *Moonlight* Sonata before coming to a spirited finish, Cann beaming all the while. The audience did, too.

Photos by Yuanjian Liu

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