Florence Beatrice Price (1887–1953)

Symphony No. 1 in E minor (1932) • Symphony No. 4 in D minor (1945)

The broad arc of Florence Price's life in many ways resembled those of the millions of African Americans who moved away from the southern United States in search of new professional opportunities and greater personal autonomy during the Jim Crow era. Born into a middle-class family in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1887, Price received a sound musical education from her mother after the city's pre-eminent white instructors refused to teach her. Since opportunities for more advanced musical training were largely unavailable for women of colour in the South, her mother enrolled her at the New England Conservatory after she completed high school in 1903. There she pursued courses of study in organ and piano pedagogy while receiving tutelage in all musical disciplines from conservatory faculty, including director George Whitefield Chadwick.

After graduating from the conservatory in 1906, Price began her professional career as an instructor at segregated academies in Arkansas and Georgia. She married an attorney, Thomas Jewell Price, six years later, and the two remained in Little Rock until a brutal lynching and financial difficulties prompted the family to relocate to Chicago in 1927. During this 15-year period, she managed a large private piano studio, composed an extensive collection of pedagogical music for children, and began raising her two daughters, Florence and Edith. Price's career as a composer erupted after she moved to Chicago, where she had developed contacts while taking summer courses at the Chicago Musical College. With the added support of leading figures within the Chicago Black Renaissance, especially Estelle Bonds, whose home served as a central gathering place for artists, Price's works won several contests designed to support black composers. These victories propelled her into the national spotlight and garnered attention from musical luminaries like contralto Marian Anderson, with whom she collaborated extensively, and Chicago Symphony Orchestra director Frederick Stock. Over the course of her later career, Price wrote in a variety of genres for the classical and popular marketplaces and participated actively in local chapters of the National Association for Negro Musicians (NANM) and the National Federation of Music Clubs.

With few connections to a local orchestra before moving to Chicago, Price had little incentive to pursue symphonic composition. But the Rodman Wanamaker prize sponsored by the NANM, which featured an orchestral music category, afforded her a potentially gainful opportunity to explore symphonic writing without the need to secure a performance. Her *Symphony in E minor* won the $500 first prize in 1932. Frederick Stock took an interest in the piece and agreed to give its premiere with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at the city's Century of Progress International Exhibition in June 1933. This concert marked the first time a major American orchestra had performed a piece written by an African American woman.

Price wrote at least two other symphonies (*No. 3* and *No. 4*), while a fourth (*No. 2*) is presumed missing or incomplete; only a few finished measures survive. The circumstances surrounding the composition of her *Fourth Symphony*, which is featured on this recording, are opaque, for it remained unperformed during her lifetime and no evidence suggests that she wrote it for a contest. Price faced health complications during the 1940s and 1950s that might have prevented her from pursuing a performance as actively as she might have otherwise. In the months leading up to her sudden death, she was preparing for opportunities abroad and might have attempted to secure a premiere overseas had she been able to complete the journey.

Symphony No. 1 in E Minor

1. Allegro ma non troppo
2. Largo, maestoso
3. Juba Dance
4. Finale

As musicologist Rae Linda Brown has shown in her critical edition of the *Symphony in E minor*, which was used for this recording, the piece owes a stylistic debt to Antonín Dvořák's *Symphony No. 9 in E minor "From the New World"* (1893), and to the music of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. Both composers integrated elements of the Negro spirituals and traditional Negro dances into their large-scale symphonic works, and Price followed suit. She once wrote, "We are waking up to the fact pregnant with possibilities that we *already* have a folk music in the Negro spirituals—music which is potent, poignant, compelling. It is simple heart music and therefore powerful." Like Dvořák, Price did not tend to quote from Negro spirituals or dances directly, but rather infused the symphony with idiomatic gestures drawn from their melodies and rhythms.

The symphony follows the standard four-movement plan: an *allegro* in sonata form; a slow, lyrical second movement; a dance-like *rondo*; and a *presto* finale. The opening *Allegro ma non troppo* combines a brooding agitation reminiscent of Johannes Brahms' orchestral music in minor keys (the *Tragic Overture* or the *First Symphony,* for example) and a flair for the grand gesture akin to William Grant Still's roughly contemporary *"Afro- American" Symphony*. The movement's broad, lyrical themes openly draw from Negro folk idioms with the heavy use of the pentatonic scale and judicious syncopation. The stately, hymn-like theme of the second movement, *Largo, maestoso,* presented by a full chorus of brass instruments, draws from Price's experiences as an organist. A series of call-and-response units between various soloists and the brass chorale culminates in a grand restatement of the opening, replete with tubular bells.

Whereas symphonists in the Germanic tradition typically included a *scherzo* (literally, "a joke") in the third movement, certain composers used vernacular dances in its place. The American composer George Frederick Bristow, for example, used a polka in his *Second Symphony*. As in many of her works in conventional genres, here Price drew from the wellspring of Negro vernacular dance by writing a "juba," an antebellum slave style characterized by complex body percussion (foot stomping, chest patting) and syncopated melodies. Price's colourful treatment, which includes a slide whistle, fully captures the style's lighthearted character. The rollicking *Finale* is another example of one of the oldest symphonic traditions: a light, propulsive *perpetuum mobile* in a dance-like compound meter that culminates in a satisfying climax.

Symphony No. 4 in D Minor

1. Tempo moderato
2. Andante cantabile
3. Juba Dance
4. Scherzo

The *Symphony No. 4 in D minor* is cut from the same stylistic cloth, and it shares the standard four-movement arrangement, complete with a *Juba Dance*. The intense character of the opening movement, *Tempo moderato,* closely matches that of the earlier work, but the primary melody, sounded in the winds and brass after a brief introduction, is less sweeping; it also contains a quick reference to the Negro spiritual "*Wade in the Water*." This compactness allowed Price to use specific motives (or bits and pieces of the tune) as the basis for extensive development and colourful elaboration throughout the rest of the movement—as if she took three notes and turned the dial on her

musical kaleidoscope. After a restatement of the main theme following this developmental process, the expected secondary theme appears in its full glory in a moment that sounds like Price pulled all the stops of her organ. A grandiose coda provides a fitting close.

The primary melody of the brief second movement, marked *Andante cantabile* and sounded first in the oboe, is reminiscent of a gentle lullaby. A series of compact variations highlights Price's penchant for tight ensemble writing among the orchestra's distinct instrument groupings. She returned to an upbeat but easygoing *Juba Dance* in the next movement. The strings and woodwinds drive the highly syncopated melody in the opening section with the lower strings providing characteristic offbeat punctuation. A contrasting middle section unlike anything else in Price's symphonic *oeuvre* interrupts the dance. A long, sinewy melody in the oboe, underpinned by pizzicato strings, paints a portrait of a different time and place altogether. The musical language strongly evokes Duke Ellington's "jungle style," which had become his signature by this time. As in the *First Symphony*, the breathless final movement, *Scherzo*, alternates between stern and playful moods that rise to an explosive conclusion.

Symphony No. 3 in C minor • The Mississippi River • Ethiopia's Shadow in America

Florence Beatrice Price, affectionately called "Bea" by friends and family, was one of the most versatile and accomplished American musicians of her generation. Born in Little Rock, Arkansas, she graduated with honors from the New England Conservatory in 1906. Following in her parents' footsteps, she then pursued a career as an educator in southern schools and colleges dedicated to African American students. Some of her earliest compositions written in this context became staples of her teaching repertoire. Amid increasing racial violence in Little Rock, however, Price and her family moved to Chicago in 1927, where she reunited with relatives who helped integrate her into the local musical ecosystem.

The musicologist Samantha Ege has shown that the vitality of Chicago's classical music scene, especially among Black women, proved to be a boundless source of inspiration for Price the composer. During her first five years in residence, she completed some of her most significant works, including her *Symphony in E minor*, *Ethiopia's Shadow in America*, and the *Piano Concerto in One Movement*. The first two of these won awards in a 1932 competition for Black composers sponsored by the National Association of Negro Musicians. Her winning symphony attracted the attention of Frederick Stock, conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, who programmed it during the Century of Progress Exposition the following year. Beginning in 1935, Price also developed a close working relationship with the renowned contralto Marian Anderson, who championed her music on the recital stage.

Although Price was welcomed as the first African American member of local groups like the Chicago Club of Women Organists and the Musicians Club of Women, prevailing patterns of racial and gender discrimination at times hindered her professional progress. Conductors Serge Koussevitzky and Artur Rodziński, for example, declined to perform her *Third* and *Fourth Symphonies* despite successes in Chicago that exceeded those of other composers they chose to perform. Price's pieces for voice, piano, and organ nevertheless remained staples of the repertoire for decades to come. The recovery of dozens of manuscript scores in 2009 has enabled more of her extensive body of work to reach new audiences.

Symphony No. 3 in C Minor

1. Andante – Allegro
2. Andante ma non troppo
3. Juba
4. Scherzo. Finale

Despite the ongoing economic depression, the 1930s proved to be a period of great creative energy for Price. Her success in competitions early in the decade gave way to participation in events sponsored by the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Federal Music Project – a New Deal initiative designed to support struggling professional musicians while providing communities with much-needed access to concerts. With government sponsored venues now available, Price was able to secure several public performances of older pieces while continuing to compose new large-scale works, including the *Third Symphony*. The Michigan WPA Symphony Orchestra of Detroit premiered the work in November 1940 under the direction of Valter Poole.

A letter written before the symphony's premiere offers one of the only first-hand accounts of Price's compositional approach. "It is intended to be Negroid in character and expression," she wrote, but "no attempt has been made to project Negro music solely in the purely traditional manner." That is, she wanted to project aspects of her cultural heritage in a symphonic framework without making direct references to an existing body of folk songs and dances – a broad creative challenge broached by many composers around the world.

The symphony's first and fourth movements illustrate this approach well. As Price explained in her letter, they were "meant to follow conventional lines of form and development" – what music theorists call "sonata-allegro form". In this standard three-part mold, two contrasting melodies appear in close succession near the beginning of the movement, become fragmented and rearranged in the middle (as through a kaleidoscope), and return in slightly varied forms near the end. Both movements broadly fit this pattern, but the melodies are clearly informed by folk songs and dances of the African diaspora. The second theme in the first movement, for example, breathes the spirit of "Deep River".

The two inner movements display what Price described in her letter as "the spiritualistic theme" and "the strongly syncopated rhythms of the Juba". When bringing African American cultural heritage to bear in her symphonic music, she believed both aspects were essential. The second movement, emphasizing the "spiritualistic theme", is a pensive meditation with particularly effective writing for woodwind and brass choirs, learned in part from her experiences as a performing organist. As in her other symphonies, the third movement is an upbeat "Juba dance" rife with humor accentuated by sharp character contrasts. A slithering middle section offers a brief respite before the Juba finishes with a flourish as the upper woodwind sign off with a rising V–I cadence.

The Mississippi River

1. Andante (bars 1–239) –
2. Andante con moto – Allegretto (bars 240–337) –
3. Allegro – Andante – Adagio – Allegretto (bars 338–475) –
4. Andante – Allegretto – Allegro (bars 476–682)

In contrast to the symphony, *The Mississippi River* intentionally quotes several tunes with origins in the African diaspora, granting it a profound sense of place. Rivers, of course, pervade the spirituals repertoire, while the Mississippi River itself was a dominant geographic feature of Price's life as she moved from Arkansas to Boston and back again before traveling upriver to Illinois. The specific songs quoted in the suite capture the combined struggles and dynamism of Black migration across the United States.

Price's orchestral portrait certainly matches the river's grandeur. The headwaters in Minnesota are introduced by brass chorales and birdsong that give way to a gentle southward flow through Indigenous lands, marked by soft drumbeats. A distant quotation of "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" sets off a new section featuring harder rapids, perhaps near Nauvoo, Illinois and the northern border of legalized slavery in antebellum Missouri. As the rapids die away, a full-blown dance band enters the scene but is sharply interrupted by a profound meditation on several spirituals in succession: "Stand Still Jordan", "Deep River", and "Go Down, Moses". Snippets of "Lalotte", a Creole tune well known in antebellum New Orleans, and "Steamboat Bill", a song made famous in the 1928 cartoon *Steamboat Willie*, offer moments of levity before another meditation on "Nobody Knows" sets off a turbulent climax with echoes of other spirituals periodically emerging from the texture.

Ethiopia's Shadow in America

1. The Arrival of the Negro in America when first brought here as a slave: Introduction and Allegretto
2. His Resignation and Faith: Andante
3. His Adaptation, A fusion of his native and acquired impulses: Allegro

Ethiopia's Shadow in America is one of only a few pieces in Price's catalog for which she provided a descriptive accompanying narrative. The first page of the manuscript score explains that she wanted it to portray "I – The Arrival of the Negro in America when first brought here as a slave. II – His Resignation and Faith. III – His Adaptation, A fusion of his native and acquired impulses." Her use of a three-part historical arc to trace the American experience of enslaved Africans aligns with works of certain Harlem Renaissance figures like Will Marion Cook, William Grant Still, and Duke Ellington.

A brief introduction featuring a solo clarinet draws listeners into the story before launching into the two-part opening movement. The first part, a lushly orchestrated *Adagio*, moves seamlessly between simple melodic material reminiscent of folk music and the complex harmonic language used to enhance dramatic situations in opera and film. A quiet close gives way to a buoyant *Allegretto* introduced by the wood block and plucked strings. The first violins then take off with a sinewy syncopated melody that unfolds in various guises throughout the movement while percussion instruments add sparkle. The second movement carries a religious mood as a string choir accompanies the soft lament of a solo violinist. A cellist later takes up this restrained tune before it fades to an echo in the French horn, clarinet, and oboe. A catchy melody accompanied by dance rhythms whips the third movement into a whirling array of orchestral color before a recollection of the opening *Adagio* grinds it to a halt. Not to be overtaken by the past, the dance resumes, closing the piece in grand fashion.

Concert Overtures Nos. 1 and 2 • Songs of the Oak • The Oak • Colonial Dance • Suite of Dances

Florence B. Price was a consummate musician – at once a virtuoso pianist and organist, a prolific composer, and a distinguished pedagogue. Though known primarily as a composer today, each of these disciplines reinforced the others, leading to a stylistically capacious catalog of nearly four hundred works.

Born in Little Rock, Arkansas, and trained at Boston's New England Conservatory, Price dedicated the first 20 years of her professional career to providing musical instruction to African American students at segregated southern academies and in her private piano studio – environments for which she composed a range of pedagogical works. During the mid-1920s, she expanded her portfolio with substantial pieces for solo piano that won national contests designed to support Black

composers. Sadly, the elation over these achievements was severely curtailed by pervasive racist violence that drove her family to relocate to Chicago in 1927.

The South Side of Chicago offered Price an invigorating cultural environment shaped by the ongoing Black Renaissance that had erupted there, in Harlem, and elsewhere around the country. It was among the Black writers, dancers, and musicians of Chicago – especially a community of artistic women – that Price refined a distinctive musical language honoring her African American cultural heritage through a variety of stylistic means, from allusions to the spirituals to contemporary reinterpretations of the African-derived Juba dance. Over the course of her career, Price composed in nearly every classical genre other than opera and found an astonishingly diverse array of individuals and organizations willing to champion her music – a list that included contraltos Marian Anderson and Etta Moten, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Woman's Symphony Orchestra of Chicago, the National Association of Negro Musicians, government-sponsored ensembles during the New Deal era, Chicago's flourishing network of women's music clubs, and even athletic bands at southern universities.

Shortly after moving to Chicago, Price turned to orchestral music for the first time as she entered a round of contests for Black composers sponsored by the department store magnate Rodman Wanamaker. Two of her earliest works – a *Symphony in E minor* and a tone poem, *Ethiopia's Shadow in America* – won First Prize and honorable mention, respectively, in 1932. Frederick Stock and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra successfully premiered the symphony in June 1933, launching Price's career in the orchestral arena. Despite this early success, she experienced mixed performance results over the next two decades.

According to current scholarship, five of her fifteen orchestral works received performances during her lifetime, and in nearly all cases, only once. Why she wrote certain works without a guarantee of performance remains a mystery, but it is possible that some were commissioned and performed; to date, no evidence has disclosed these facts. Of the pieces on this release, audiences indisputably heard the *Concert Overture No. 1* and selections from the *Suite of Dances* during her lifetime – the *Overture* at a 1939 performance of Chicago's short-lived American Concert Orchestra under the baton of Ralph Cissne and movements from the *Suite* at a televised Chicago Symphony Orchestra concert directed by associate conductor George Schick. After Price's death in 1953, moreover, the location of the scores for all but two of the pieces on this release (*The Oak* and *Suite of Dances*) remained virtually unknown until they were recovered from Price's former summer home near St. Anne, Illinois in 2009. Here they are recorded together for the first time.

Concert Overture No. 1 on Spiritual, "Sinner, Please Don't Let This Harvest Pass"

Concert Overture No. 2 (Ending A)

The variety of genres represented on this release – overtures, tone poems, and dances – place Price's immense artistic imagination on full display. Opening the album, the two overtures show her deep connections to the repertoire of spirituals dating from Black enslavement. She once wrote, "We are waking up to the fact *pregnant with possibilities* that we already have a folk music in the Negro spirituals" (emphasis added). For Price, these "possibilities" were opportunities for intense musical and emotional engagement with these signal cultural touchstones. *Concert Overture No. 1* (1939), a rumination on the spiritual *Sinner, Please Don't Let This Harvest Pass* (also the inspiration for Price's *Fantasie Nègre No. 1* for solo piano) unfolds in a series of episodes that state the theme in its totality or present it as fragments with shifting orchestral colors and unsettled harmonies. A beautiful chorale tune and a brass fanfare offer distinct emotional contrasts. The first half of *Concert Overture*

No. 2 (1943) presents three miniature scenes in rapid succession. Based on three spirituals in turn – *Go Down, Moses*; *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen*; and *Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit* – the musical character of these sections moves from somber to poignant to ebullient. The more abstract second half combines melodic fragments from the three previous sections into a unified portrait that closes with a return to the profundity of Moses' cry for liberation found in the first spiritual.

Songs of the Oak, Tone Poem

The Oak (Ending B)

Though occasionally confused as the same work, Price's tone poems *Songs of the Oak* and *The Oak*, both dating from 1943, depart significantly in scope. *Songs of the Oak* is a tour de force of Hollywood-influenced picturesque musical storytelling, replete with imitations of woodland creatures interacting with the mighty oak tree, a righteous protector whose regal "songs" appear throughout in statements given by a full complement of brass. Tolling chimes signaling the inexorability of time close the piece as the stoic oak appears to stand unshaken for eternity. A more compact treatment of a similar image, *The Oak* shares certain sonic elements – powerful brass and fluttering woodwinds, for example – and unfolds in a series of internally anxious, almost Wagnerian, episodes that ultimately end in tragedy.

Colonial Dance

Suite of Dances

1. Allegretto
2. Allegretto
3. Allegro molto

Price maintained an abiding interest in dance as an integral part of African American life, and American life more generally, once writing, "Rhythm is of preeminent importance. In the dance, it is a compelling, onward-sweeping force that tolerates no interruption." *Colonial Dance* (n.d.) is a rollicking affair in triple time with a melody marked by the so-called Scotch snap, or emphasis on the second beat of the measure, giving it an angular but propulsive character. A contrasting middle section highlights pizzicato strings accompanied by bells. Arguably Price's most well-known work, *Suite of Dances* (n.d.) is a full orchestration of her charming *Three Little Negro Dances* for solo piano, a collection written for advancing students with the movement titles *Hoe Cake*, *Rabbit Foot*, and *Ticklin' Toes*. Published by Theodore Presser in 1933 and distributed in issues of *The Etude Magazine* in subsequent years, the piece was later arranged for concert band by Erik Leidzén and became an instant hit around the country. Here, Price's ear for orchestral coloration grants each dance a piquancy not found in other versions.

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