Florence B. Price (1887-1953)

1. Concerto in One Movement [18:23]
   played without pause
   [0:00] Moderato | [7:40] Adagio | [15:05] Allegretto
   Karen Walwyn, piano

Symphony in E Minor [38:24]
2. Movement I [16:40]
3. Movement II [13:08]
5. Movement IV [4:48]

Total Time = 56:47
The Composer

Florence B. Price (1887–1953) was born in Little Rock, Arkansas. She studied music at home before relocating to Boston to obtain an Artist’s Diploma in Organ Music and a Teacher’s Diploma in Piano from the New England Conservatory in 1906. She taught at Shorter College (1906–1910) and headed the music department at Clark University in Atlanta (1910–1912). After returning to Little Rock for a period, she moved in 1927 to Chicago, where she continued to study composition at various institutions, including the Chicago Musical College and the American Conservatory, and to teach piano. Price composed throughout her life, producing as many as 300 compositions, including teaching pieces and longer works for piano, works for chamber ensembles, orchestra, and band, and art songs and spiritual arrangements that were performed by major artists including Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson, and Leontyne Price. In the 1930s and early 1940s some of her longer works were performed by music groups sponsored by the WPA in Illinois and Michigan. Price was highly visible as a teacher, performer, and organizer in Chicago’s concert and church music spheres. She was a member of the National Association of Negro Musicians and the Chicago Music Association. In 1940 a newly-established Chicago branch of NANNM was named the Florence B. Price Music Study Guild in her honor. Florence Price died in Chicago in 1953.
The Music

Price’s Concerto in One Movement for piano was premiered in Chicago in 1934 with Price herself as pianist. The premiere was followed by another performance in Chicago by the Woman’s Symphony of Chicago, with Price’s student Margaret Bonds as soloist. There is no evidence of the piece being performed after the 1930s and, at present, there are no copies of the composer's manuscript of the orchestral score. Therefore, to revive this deserving work, the Center for Black Music Research commissioned composer Trevor Weston to reconstruct the concerto's orchestration, which was premiered in Chicago on February 17, 2011, by the Center’s New Black Music Repertory Ensemble, with Karen Walwyn as pianist. Weston’s adaptation is a synthesis of three sources, all in the composer’s hand: (1) a solo piano version with an orchestral reduction, (2) an arrangement for two pianos, and (3) an arrangement for three pianos. Copies of all three sources are contained in the Center’s archives. The two-piano version with orchestral reduction served as the primary model for the reconstructed instrumentation, since that version includes copious notes by the composer about her instrumentation. It is not known whether these notes were written prior to or subsequent to the original instrumentation.

Although this concerto is in one movement, three distinct sections, Moderato–Adagio–Allegretto, make the piece analogous to the traditional three-movement concerto. The “Moderato,” in D Minor, begins with an introduction that presents fragments of the primary theme, followed by an extended piano cadenza. The pervading minor mode and rhythmic treatments strongly suggest vernacular influences, including the spiritual, though no particular spiritual is quoted. The theme is developed throughout the movement with surprising harmonic twists, intricate exchanges between orchestral voices, and virtuosic passages in the piano. The “Adagio” section, in D major, is virtually a piano solo with sparse orchestral accompaniment. The lyrical theme is presented in various ways as straightforward Western harmonizations intersect with adventurous chromatic jaunts and a few jazzy constructs. Persistent “calls” of the oboe and thinly textured orchestral “responses” with piano accents suggest a verse-refrain treatment. The concerto concludes with a spirited dance in B-flat Major. As noted by Price scholar Rae Linda Brown, this section, marked “Allegretto,” is inspired by the “Juba,” an antebellum folk dance. Full of folksy flavor and sprightly syncopations, both the piano and the orchestra develop the theme and derived motives through varied keys and rhythmic elisions. Call-and-response textures abound between sections of the orchestra and the piano and overlapping melodic ideas create exciting polyrhythmic episodes. These elements give way to a culminating tutti statement of the theme and a boisterous final cadence.

Although Price’s earlier works embrace nationalist tenets concurrent with the ideologies of her black contemporaries, her compositional thought expanded during her later years and moved beyond overt references to vernacular culture. This wide range of influences coupled with strong craftsmanship has left an indelible legacy which is highlighted by her ground-breaking Symphony in E minor, which was the first prize winner of the 1932 Rodman Wanamaker Music Contest and is considered among the main concert musical achievements of the period. Premiered in 1933 by Frederick Stock and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at the Chicago World’s Fair Century of Progress Exhibition, Price’s Symphony in E Minor, her first symphony, is the first work by a black woman to be performed by a major symphony orchestra in the United States.

According to Rae Linda Brown, Price may have dropped the first symphony’s original subtitle (“Negro Symphony”) because she felt the strong programmatic suggestions would

Cast into the traditional four-movement model, this symphony presents a sophisticated union of Western European and African-American influences. The first movement is in sonata form and displays the conventional thematic and harmonic relationships associated with the form. Price’s choice of thematic material, however, is where one encounters the vernacular influence. The primary and secondary themes are built on a five-note (pentatonic) scale and both incorporate syncopated rhythms. Both traits are common to African-American folk music. The composer treats these themes with contrapuntal techniques and visits various keys in the development section. A rather truncated recapitulation satisfies inherent expectations while also extending thematic development to the very end.

References to church music, spirituals, and traditional African music resonate throughout the second movement. Price sets an original hymn tune by a brass choir as the primary thematic material. Over the course of the movement, the hymn tune is accompanied with “special effects” such as African drums and “cathedral chimes” (also used in the first movement) which, according to historian Wayne Shirley, Price included in her instrumentation to “make use of the Cathedral Chimes stop in the Echo division of the Roosevelt Organ in Chicago’s Auditorium Theater, the location of the premiere performance” (Florence Price Symphonies Nos. 1 and 3, edited by Rae Linda Brown and Wayne Shirley. Music of the United States of America, Vol. 19 [Middleton, Wis., A-R Editions, Inc., 2008], 271–2). The contrasting sections of the ternary form feature effective shifts in timbre as melodic ideas move from brass to woodwind instruments. Thiny textured transitions create dramatic moments of anticipation. Price’s mastery of chromatic harmony makes brief journeys to distant keys appear seamless, as the chorale treatment pervades.

In keeping with the traditional incorporation of dance elements in the third movements of Western symphonies, Price evokes the “Juba Dance,” which seems to be her dance of choice. The dance’s rhythm, as handled by Price, offers strong references to foot stomping and hand clapping. Although utilized by composers who preceded her, this “Juba” is the first symphonic treatment of the dance. Replete with “oom-pah” bass lines and gestures emblematic of folk fiddling and banjo playing, this movement is the most overt in its presentation of vernacular subjects. The movement is a rondo, characterized by dramatic moments of contrast, including the surprising use of the wind whistle, which hearkens to the tradition of whistling associated with the juba dance.

The fourth movement, also in rondo form, is propelled by a relentless triplet figure in a duple meter. The principal melodic idea is characterized by scalar ascents and descents through a minor mode. Because of the consistent pulse generated by the steady triplets, Price’s treatment of texture, dynamics, and rhythm are vital in creating the dramatic shape of the movement. In the course of variations on the initial melodic idea, Price incorporates tutti orchestrations, brilliant play with the phrasing of small and large gestures, and syncopated stresses in challenging chromatic unison passages. The symphony concludes with an accelerando through a rousing coda and culminates with an awakening crash.

—Horace J. Maxile Jr., Associate Director of Research Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College Chicago
The Artists

Leslie B. Dunner, one of the premier American conductors of his generation, enjoys an international career distinguished by the breadth of his repertoire as well as his critically lauded performances. His concert engagements have involved many major national and international orchestras, including, among others, the Atlanta, Chicago, and Cleveland orchestras and orchestras in Canada, Mexico, South Africa, and Italy. He has conducted ballet and opera performances with prestigious companies such as the American Ballet Theatre, the New York City Ballet Company, London’s Royal Ballet at Covent Garden, and Opera Ebony, and he conducted Opera Africa’s 2007 production of Mzilazi Khumalo’s Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu. Dunner is also a published and recorded composer.

Concert and recording artist Karen Walwyn made her New York recital debut at Merkin Hall, a performance that was quickly followed by her debut performance on National Public Radio. Her recordings Dark Fires: 20th Century Music for Piano, Vol. I and Dark Fires: Walwyn and Friends, Vol. II (both with Albany Records) have won glowing reviews. She is in demand as a recitalist across the United States and Europe, has taught master classes in Barcelona, Tenerife (Canary Islands), Salzburg, London, and Nice, and has appeared on many university concert series throughout the United States. Walwyn made her compositional debut with Reflections on 9/11 (Albany Records), a seven-movement work for piano solo. She is on the piano faculty at Howard University.

Trevor Weston earned masters and doctoral degrees at the University of California, Berkeley, where he studied with Richard Felciano, Andrew Imbrie, and his primary teacher Olly W. Wilson. He also studied with T. J. Anderson at Tufts University. Upon winning the prestigious George Ladd Prix de Paris, he lived and composed in Paris for two years while auditing classes at IRCAM. Weston has completed numerous commissions and his works have been performed in major venues. His composition Bleue was selected in 1998 for the Detroit Symphony Unisys African-American composer’s reading program, and he has received numerous fellowships, including the Goddard Lieberson Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and residencies at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and the MacDowell Colony. He is on the music faculty at Drew University.

The New Black Music Repertory Ensemble, the performance arm of the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College Chicago, is an ensemble of approximately 70 professional musicians with the mission to perform the widest possible range of musical expression from the African diaspora. The musicians represent professional performance practice expertise from the popular and vernacular repertoires (jazz and jazz precursors, blues, R&B, gospel, soul, rock, and many others), concert and art music repertories (vocal and instrumental works ranging from solos to chamber music and full symphonic works), and musical styles and genres from throughout the Caribbean and Latin America.

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Founded at Columbia College Chicago in 1983, the Center for Black Music Research is the only organization of its kind. It exists to illuminate the significant role that black music plays in world culture by serving as a nexus for all who value black music, by promoting scholarly thought and knowledge about black music, and by providing a safe haven for the materials and information that document the black music experience across Africa and the diaspora. Visit www.colum.edu/cbmr.

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This is the third recording in Recorded Music of the African Diaspora, a series that embraces the widest-possible range of musical styles, genres, periods, and provenances, spanning popular and vernacular musics in myriad black music performance practices to concert and art music by black composers from around the world. The series is co-produced by the Center for Black Music Research and Albany Records.
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