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Heritage Paper – Florence Beatrice Price

Florence Beatrice Price was certainly a woman to be admired and esteemed. A female composer and performer in the classical style yet rooted in her culture, her works abound in the different facets of classical music, most significantly in piano, vocal and orchestral work, and have been recognized publicly several times over. She began her prolific career in music at a tender age. Price was a child prodigy born to well-educated and professional parents in Little Rock, Arkansas. Her mother, Nee Florence Irene Gulliver, had at different times been a school teacher, a restaurant owner and realtor, and her father, James H. Smith, the first Black dentist in the area, whose services were sought by many, including a governor of the state. Price's mother took a keen interest in her education from a very early age, and since at the time Florence Irene Gulliver Smith went to school, music education was mandatory up to eighth grade, she knew enough music to begin nurturing her child's unmistakable musical talent. At the age of four, Price's mother showcased her daughter's ability for the first time through a recital performance on the piano. This amazing feat however was certainly not her last as a young, growing musician. At the age of eleven, Price published her first work, which is unfortunately no longer in print, and by age sixteen had received a commission for another.

During elementary school, she was taught by one of the most recognized African American school teachers, Charlotte A. Stephens, whose seventy-year long career earned her quite a high level of esteem. Little Rock Elementary was named for her soon after. Under her charge, Price excelled and eventually graduated as valedictorian of her class at fourteen

years old from Capitol High School. She enrolled two years later at the New England Conservatory in Boston and began study with Frederick S. Converse and George Whitefield Chadwick who taught music theory, and with Henry M. Dunham, in organ performance. Price graduated in 1906 with a Bachelor's degree in organ performance and music education (piano). During her three years at the conservatory, she performed publicly as a pianist on two known occasions, the dates and programs for which have been recorded. They included Schumann's Variations, Opus 5, which Price played when she was seventeen, and *Allegro* by Reinecke which she presented at the age of nineteen. According to some surviving documentation, she also performed organ works of Dubois, Merkel, Lemmens and H. M. Dunham, her teacher. Typically, it is assumed that she gave various other concerts while in Boston, the records of which are no longer available. There also exists an account which suggests the possibility of the existence of a symphony which she wrote and which was performed during this period. However, if this work was indeed written, it is not available outside of the family files.

Price returned to Little Rock, Arkansas at the end of her undergraduate years and began teaching at Shorter College in the North of the town, while keeping house for her father who had since separated from his wife. Four years later, she accepted the position of musical director at Clark University in Atlanta, but returned to Little Rock two years hence to wed Thomas J. Price, who was a flourishing young attorney. The couple lived there comfortably for fifteen years during which time Thomas had established his own office, and Florence had borne three children, two girls and a boy who died in infancy. However, her involvement in music was not abandoned as she continued to teach privately and to compose. In 1925 and 1927, her pieces won second place in the Holstein Prize competition of *Opportunity* magazine.

At this time however, the racial climate of Little Rock and of the south in general had been gradually declining, and the Price family moved to Chicago. There Florence began her graduate study in music, attending six different colleges at different times and studying under the instruction of Carl Busche, Wesley La Violette and Arthur Olaf Anderson, among others. Some of her compositions had been published by G. Schirmer Ltd. McKinley publishing company also became interested in her work on beginner's piano pieces, the product of which would become increasingly important in her life. In 1932 came her most significant achievement up to that point, when her "Symphony in E minor", soon after played by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, won the acclaimed Wanamaker Prize and made her famous. In addition to that remarkable accomplishment, her piano sonata in E minor topped its category in the same competition and her student and friend Margaret Bonds, claimed first prize for her song entitled, "The Sea Ghost". Indeed during this period, the Great Depression was affecting the lives of all Americans. Her earnings from teaching and writing for radio commercials as well her competition winnings, of \$750, were certainly a large help. One existing quote of Florence Price gives some insight into her life at the time. She writes: "I found it possible to snatch a few precious days in the month of January in which to write undisturbed. But, oh dear me, when shall I ever be so fortunate again as to break a foot!" It turns out that this misfortune produced the symphony in E minor that earned her the Wanamaker Prize.

After her graduation in 1934, she continued to compose. Unfortunately, her marriage had slowly deteriorated and, around this time, she separated from her husband. This put her in even more financial difficulty, and forced her and her two daughters to move in with her student, Margaret Bonds, whom they lived with for years to come. During this difficult time, Price continued to compose extensively. She supported her family as a composer of didactic

piano works in addition to her more involved, large-scale pieces, an organist for silent films and an orchestrator for WGN radio. Her third and last symphony was written in 1940 and she passed away from a stroke the very next year.

Florence Price composed over three hundreds songs, piano pieces and orchestral works. Many of these songs were her arrangements of Negro folk songs and African American spirituals and art songs, which display clearly the character of black culture and music. Her professor at the New England Conservatory, George Chadwick, was a composer with great interest in African musical styles and motifs, many of his pieces eventually showing this influence. Indeed, Price also followed this course, and allowed the culture in which she was raised to impact her music. One of the most significant instances of this occurs in the last movement of her E minor symphony, which makes use of the rhythms of the *juba* dance, which was of African origin, and quite common during the nineteenth century among the black residents of the southern states. Very few of her actual large works use folk melodies directly, but a sense of the pathos of southern life, as well as the rhythmic nature of all aspects of black culture is certainly evident throughout. This, coupled with her overflowing musical brilliance, made Florence Price one of the most renowned composers in the United States. And this recognition is augmented still by her resilience as a black female composer, at a time when such a profession was hardly viable. Her genius, uniqueness and strength are admirable in the highest sense, and the esteem in which her name is held, is certainly truly deserved.

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