

Florence Price (1887-1953): Symphony No. 3 in C Minor (1940)

Florence Price was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1887. At the time, her father was one of the few Black dentists in the nation, and her mother, of mixed-race, was also a professional, having worked as a school teacher, real estate agent, and restaurant owner. Unusual for the time, Price grew up in a racially integrated middle-class neighborhood. Her musical talent was obvious early on. Her mother, a gifted pianist, was her first piano teacher, and Price gave her first recital at age 4, and wrote her first musical compositions by age 11. She also excelled in school, graduating as valedictorian of her class at age 14. Her parents were determined that Price further her education at the best university possible, but feared that racism would present an obstacle for admission. Light in complexion, her mother insisted that she present herself as Mexican, and she applied to the New England Conservatory of Music, one of the premiere music schools, listing her hometown as Pueblo, Mexico. She was accepted on scholarship and excelled, pursuing a double major in piano pedagogy and organ performance. She also lucky to found an encouraging mentor in the American composer George Whitefield Chadwick, who nurtured the talents of other young black composers, including William Grant Still, and encouraged Price in incorporating black spirituals into her compositions. Following graduation, Price returned to the South, teaching music at Clark Atlanta University, where she became chair of the department. She left that position to raise a family with her husband in Little Rock, Arkansas, but she found the town very different from the place she experienced as a child. Increasing acts of violence and enforced segregation led the family to move to Chicago. There they became part of the thriving arts and cultural community known as the Chicago Black Renaissance. Price was exhilarated and returned again to composition, continuing her studies at the Chicago Music College and the American Conservatory of Music. She also found a particularly lasting friend and advocate in the composer and pianist Margaret Bonds, who had studied with Price. Price's marriage dissolved after her husband became abusive, and she lived with Bonds for a time after leaving him. As a single mother now, she pieced together work playing organ for silent films and writing musical advertisements for radio. Despite these obstacles, Price and Bonds continued to encourage one another in composition. In 1932 they submitted entries for a competition sponsored by Rodman Wannamaker, and Price's Symphony No. 1 in E Minor won the top prize (Bonds won too, in a category for best song). This honor led to the work's performance by the Chicago Symphony in 1933, the first time a symphony by a black woman had been performed by a major American orchestra.

As the result of the success her first symphony and other works, Price won a commission from the Works Progress Administration's Federal Music Project to compose the Symphony No. 3 in C Minor. The support afforded her the extra time to complete the work, which was written in 1938-1939 in the midst of the Great Depression. She made additional revisions in 1940, just before the premiere of the work by the Detroit Civic Orchestra. A letter she wrote one year later to the conductor Serge Koussevitsky in hopes that he would program the symphony provides insight into her vision for the piece:

I have a symphony in which I tried to portray a cross section of Negro life and psychology as it is today, influenced by urban life north of the Mason and Dixon line. It is not 'program' music. I merely had in mind the life and music of the Negro of today and for that reason treated my themes in a manner different from what I would have done if I had centered my attention upon the religious themes of antebellum days, or yet the ragtime and jazz that followed; rather a fusion of these, colored by present cultural influences.

In other words, Price wanted to write a symphony for the present rather than an homage to the past. As we hear the work today, it's clear that she achieved a fusion of styles past and present, both vernacular and classical in its approach.

I: Andante-Allegro

The first movement opens with a gorgeous low chorale reminiscent of Bruckner or Wagner. In sonata form, one of the themes plays a bit with a melody reminiscent of the black spiritual "Motherless Child."

II. Andante ma non troppo

Exquisitely orchestrated, Price's gifts for contrasting and layering textures in the orchestra really shine in this hymn-like movement.

III. Juba: Allegro

The third movement in a symphony is typically the orchestra's chance to dance. Traditionally this would be a courtly minuet or a faster scherzo, but in all four of her symphonies Price substitutes a "Juba," a dance with African origins. As practiced by enslaved blacks in the American South, it featured syncopated rhythms performed by slapping and clapping of the hands, along with rhythms kept in the feet. This use of body percussion developed because drumming was prohibited by plantation owners, who feared its use as a covert means of communication. It also features what Jelly Roll Morton referred to as the "Spanish Tinge" in early New Orleans jazz—the influence of habanera and tango rhythms via Afro-Latin culture in the Caribbean and deep South.

IV. Scherzo-Finale: Allegro

A rollicking frolic in 6/8 time, Price closes the symphony with a musical exuberance and optimism far removed from its somber beginning.