**Florence Price**

*Born:* April 9th, 1887, Little Rock, Arkansas  
*Died:* June 3rd, 1953, Chicago, Illinois  
*Period of Music:* 20th Century, Modern Era

**Biography:**

Florence Price was born in 1887 in Little Rock, Arkansas to a mixed-race family. Despite racial issues of the era, her family was well respected and thrived within their community. Her mother was a music teacher who guided Florence’s early musical training. By the time Florence was 4, she had performed her first piano recital, and by age 11, she had her first composition published. By the time she was 14, she had graduated high school and enrolled at the New England Conservatory of Music with a major in piano and organ performance.

After graduating from the conservatory, Price was unable to find employment. In 1912 she married Thomas J. Price, an attorney in Little Rock. After being refused admission to the all-white Arkansas Music Teachers Association, she founded the Little Rock Club of Musicians and taught music at the segregated black schools. They moved to Chicago with their two daughters due to heightening racial tensions in their community in 1927.

Florence Price’s career flourished after the move to Chicago. It was around 1928 when the G. Schirmer and McKinley publishing companies began to publish her songs, piano music, and especially her instructional pieces for piano. She filed for divorce from Thomas Price in 1928. As a single mother, she earned a living from the sales of her piano works and as composer of popular songs (under the pseudonym of Vee Jay). She also played organ for the silent films and orchestrated for a radio station.

After her divorce, she and the children moved in with her student and friend Margaret Bonds. Florence Price’s friendship with Margaret Bonds gained national recognition and performances of their music for composers. Price and Bonds had submitted compositions for the 1932 Wanamaker competition and both won awards that year. Price gave music lessons at home and composed more than 300 works including symphonies, organ works, piano concertos, works for violin, arrangements of spirituals, art songs, and chamber works.

Even though she was trained in the European classical tradition, Price’s music also consists of American idioms and is steeped in her Southern roots. She wrote with a vernacular style, using sounds and ideas that fit the reality of urban society. She often used the music of the African-American church as material for her arrangements since she was a deeply religious woman. She incorporated elements of African-American spirituals, emphasizing the rhythm and syncopation of the spirituals rather than just using the texts. Her melodies were blues-inspired and mixed with more

*Review of her Symphony No, 1: “It is a faultless work, a work that speaks its own message with restraint and yet with passion . . . worthy of a place in the regular symphonic repertory.” – Chicago Daily News*
traditional, European Romantic techniques. This weaving of tradition and modernism was a signature element of her compositional style.

Florence Price became the first African American female composer to have a symphony performed by a major American orchestra when Music Director Frederick Stock and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra played the world premiere of her Symphony No. 1 in E minor on June 15, 1933. Although this premiere brought instant recognition and fame to Price, she was still not as successful as other male composers. All through her life, Price continued to wage an uphill battle facing segregation, the Jim Crow laws, entrenched racism, and sexism of the times.

Price continued to compose throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, until her death in 1953. Many of her works have been lost including one of her last compositions, Symphony No. 2. In 2009, a substantial collection of her works and papers were found in an abandoned dilapidated house on the outskirts of St. Anne, Illinois. These consisted of dozens of her scores, including her two violin concertos and her fourth symphony.

Quick Facts:
- She was the first African American woman to have a symphony performed by a major orchestra.
- She enrolled in the New England Conservatory of Music at the young age of 14 years old.
- She played organ for silent films and orchestrated for a radio station.

Selected Compositions for Listening:
Spotify Playlist URL: https://tinyurl.com/pricelisten
- Negro Folksongs in Counterpoint: No. 5: Swing Low, Sweet Chariot
- My Dream
- Fantasie negre
- Violin Concerto No. 1 in D Major: I. Tempo moderato
- Violin Concerto No. 2
- My Soul’s Been Anchored in de Lord
- Symphony in E Minor
- Concerto in One Movement

Other Suggested Listening:

Learn More about Florence Price: