

# Olive- Sity sounds like

By Linda Holzer

In her book *Hidden Figures* (the basis for the 2016 movie of the same name), Margot Lee Shetterly observed, "The electrified fence of segregation and the centuries of shocks it delivered so effectively circumscribed the lives of American blacks that even after the current was turned off, the idea of climbing the fence inspired dread."<sup>1</sup>

Florence Price, a child prodigy in music from Little Rock, Arkansas, scaled the fence of segregation, and soared beyond its limits. Like the brilliant NASA mathematicians Katherine G. Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson, Price was an unsung hero at times, but her talent triumphed, and now, her music is enjoying a resurgence. Everyone now has the opportunity to play and teach her music.



Florence Price This is what diversity sounds like

Florence Price as a teenager.

## Biography

A brilliant mind is not limited by color or gender or geography. Born Florence Beatrice Smith in April 1887, the composer grew up in a household that highly valued the arts and education. Her father, Dr. James Smith, was a dentist, and also a painter, favoring oils. He had come to Arkansas by way of Chicago. He received his training in dentistry in Philadelphia as an apprentice to white dentists, having been denied admission to dental school due to his race. The apprenticeship prepared him to earn professional certification, which he achieved.<sup>2</sup> He set up his practice in Chicago, which had a prosperous and well-established black community. The Chicago Fire of 1871 destroyed his practice. Unwilling to be held back by adversity, Dr. Smith moved south to Arkansas, worked as a teacher, raised money for replacement dental equipment, and then re-established his dental practice, this time in Little Rock, the capital city. He married Florence Gulliver in 1876; she, too, was well-educated, having earlier taught in the Indianapolis public schools in her native Indiana.

Florence Beatrice Smith was the youngest of three children born to Dr. Smith and his wife. Her mother was her first piano teacher. Her musical gifts manifested early, and her mother presented her in a recital of her own music at the age of four. Another musical influence in her youth was Charlotte Andrews Stephens, a talented, highly respected African-American teacher in the Little Rock School District who had studied for two years at Oberlin Conservatory.

In the post-Reconstruction South, after the passage of “Jim

Crow” laws, segregated schools for black children provided limited resources and inferior facilities. Union School, a segregated school Florence Smith attended, had originally been run by Quakers before it was acquired by the Little Rock School District. In 1902, Union School was relocated, and the name was changed to Capitol Hill School, serving elementary through high school grades. Unfortunately, the school had no library. Through the determined efforts of English teacher Carrie Still Shepperson (the mother of composer William Grant Still), an alumni group raised funds to eventually establish a school library for



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black students.<sup>3</sup> Florence Smith graduated as valedictorian from Capitol Hill School. Her parents recognized that their daughter’s exceptional talent warranted the best education, and that meant enrolling her in college out of state. They selected the prestigious New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, known for fair admission policies (all qualified students were welcome, regardless of race or gender). She enrolled there in 1903.

Florence Smith thrived in the competitive conservatory environment, and was undaunted to be living in a city with a population of slightly more than half a million people (Little Rock’s population at that time was approximately 38,000). In addition to performance studies in piano and organ, she was accepted to study composition with the director of the conservatory, George Chadwick. Her talents blossomed, and, working at an accelerated pace, within three years she graduated with honors and two degrees: a Teacher’s Diploma in Piano, and a Soloist’s Diploma in Organ.

### Making it in the “Real World”

After graduation, Florence Smith seized every opportunity she could to work as a professional musician, even though racial and gender barriers in the early twentieth century limited what doors would open. In 1906, having moved back to Arkansas from Massachusetts, she launched herself vigorously into a music teaching career, first at Cotton Plant-Arkadelphia Academy in southern Arkansas, then at Shorter College in North Little Rock, and finally in Atlanta as



Graduating class photo from *The Neume*, 1906. Boston: New England Conservatory. Courtesy of the New England Conservatory Archives.

chair of the music department at Clark University, also a historically black school. She distinguished herself in Atlanta in all three realms: as a performer, composer, and teacher. She returned to Little Rock in 1912 to marry attorney Thomas Price and raise a family. Mrs. Price established a music teaching studio, and continued composing. After the Arkansas State Music Teachers Association was founded in 1917, she applied to become a member, and was denied due to her race.<sup>4</sup> Unwilling to settle for less, Price subsequently founded the Little Rock Club of Musicians, for African-Americans. Furthering her musical education with trips to Chicago to study at such institutions as the University of Chicago and the American Conservatory of Music, Florence

Price honed her craft.

In autumn of 1919, following the violent tragedy of the Elaine Race Massacres in nearby Elaine, Arkansas, her husband assisted attorney Scipio Jones in civil rights cases to defend the twelve black men who had been jailed and sentenced to death. The defendants were ultimately released, but the legal process was fraught. Racial tensions in Arkansas grew worse, and lynchings made remaining in Little Rock untenable. The Price family fled Arkansas after the spring 1927 lynching of John Carter. Chicago became their new home. The stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression threw many out of work, including Thomas Price. To support the family, Mrs. Price became a musical entrepreneur, working as an

organ accompanist for silent films at a downtown theater, arranging music for the WGN Radio orchestra, and composing commercial jingles, in addition to teaching music lessons.

In the early 1930s, following her divorce, Florence Price delved into composing large-scale works. Now in her forties, her creative voice had matured, and her work received enthusiastic acclaim. The Rodman Wannamaker Music Competition awarded her first prize for her Symphony No. 1, and in the solo instrumental category, first prize for Piano Sonata in E Minor. She made history on June 15, 1933, when the Chicago Symphony, under conductor Frederick Stock, gave the world premiere of her Symphony No. 1 in E Minor. The night before, the symphony had

opened its summer concert series as part of the World's Fair, with a program devoted to American music, featuring George Gershwin as soloist in his *Concerto in F* and *Rhapsody in Blue*. Gershwin was in the audience for the June 15 concert, and witnessed Price become the first African-American woman to have a symphony performed by a major American orchestra.

Florence Price was a contemporary of George Gershwin, Aaron Copland, William Grant Still, Charles Griffes, and John Alden Carpenter. Prolific, she composed more than 300 works, including large-scale masterpieces such as symphonies, concertos (two for violin, one for piano), a virtuoso piano sonata, piano quintet, and string quartets, as well as smaller works such as art songs, and character pieces for piano and for violin. Immersed in the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance, Price set texts by Langston Hughes, and Paul Laurence Dunbar. Her songs were performed by artists such as Marian Anderson, Leontyne Price, and others. Toward the end of her career, Price was commissioned by the British conductor Sir John Barbirolli, who premiered her *Suite for Strings* in Manchester, England.

### Trying Price's Music on for Size

A good introduction to Florence Price's piano music is her suite of 1926, *In the Land 'o Cotton*, an upper-intermediate level work. The suite is in four movements: "At the Cotton Gin," "Dreaming," "Song Without Words," and "Dance." Total performance

time with repeats for the entire suite is approximately fourteen minutes. The movements may also be performed individually. (Visit [ClavierCompanion.com](http://ClavierCompanion.com) to see and hear excerpts from each movement.)

The first and fourth movements are built on appealing, energetic rhythm patterns, and the music fits the hand well. Students who are at the level of playing Mendelssohn and Chopin will be

comfortable with the harmonic language. The inner movements feature rich harmonies, including four-note chords, but the slower tempi allow the performer to roll any bass chords that performers with smaller hands may find hard to reach.

In developing her style, Price successfully blended two worlds: the African-American musical heritage of her Arkansas childhood (spirituals, gospel,



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Chicago Symphony Orchestra  
 Frederick A. Stock, Conductor  
 Roland Hayes, Soloist

*OVERTURE—"IN OLD VIRGINIA" . . . . . POWELL*

*ARIA—"LE REPOS DE LA SAINTE FAMILLE" . . . . . BERLIOZ*  
 FROM "L'ENFANCE DU CHRIST"  
 (First time in Chicago)

*SYMPHONY IN E. MINOR . . . . . FLORENCE PRICE*  
 (First performance)

*ARIA—"ON-AWAY, AWAKE BELOVED" . . . S. COLERIDGE-TAYLOR*  
 FROM "HAWAIIA"

INTERMISSION

*CONCERTINO, for PIANO and ORCHESTRA*  
 . . . . . JOHN ALDEN CARPENTER  
 ALLEGRO CON MOTO  
 LENTO GRAZIOSO—ALLEGRO  
 (MISS MARGARET BONDS—SOLOIST)

*TWO NEGRO SPIRITUALS*  
 (a) "Swing Low Sweet Chariot"  
 Arranged and orchestrated by H. T. BURLEIGH

(b) "Bye and Bye"  
 Arranged and orchestrated by ROLAND HAYES

*BAMBOULA . . . . . S. COLERIDGE-TAYLOR*  
 THE PIANO IS A STEINWAY

Courtesy of Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra

blues, jazz), and the European art music influences from her formal studies. Her gifts for poignant melody, expressive harmony, and thoughtful phrasing are evident throughout her works. She can be considered a composer-pianist in the tradition of Brahms.

### Detective Work

When Florence Price died in 1953, most of her concert pieces remained in manuscript, unpublished. Like other women composers at that time, she had been unable to secure major support from a publisher; only a very small fraction of her works was in print, among several different publishers. The resurrection of Florence Price, in the history books and concert halls, is largely due to these scholars: Eileen Southern (musicologist, and the first black tenured professor at Harvard), Barbara Garvey Jackson (musicologist, owner and editor of ClarNan Editions), Rae Linda Brown (musicologist, and Price's principal biographer), and Althea Waites (concert pianist, professor). Without them, a powerful creative voice in American music would have been silenced through neglect.

I found out about Florence Price while flipping through the *Ladyslipper Music* catalog in North Carolina one day in the early 1990s. I noticed a cassette recording, *Althea Waites Performs the Piano Music of Florence Price*. Curious, I bought it, and was inspired by what I heard. Althea Waites was the first pianist to make a recording of Price's piano music. Released in 1987 on Cambria Records,

it contained the monumental Sonata in E Minor, a virtuoso work of approximately twenty-seven minutes duration, the three-movement suite *Dances in the Canebrakes*, and two single pieces, *The Old Boatman* and *Cotton Dance*.

Finding scores for Price's piano music was no easy task in the 1980s, decades after the composer's death. In a recent interview, Prof. Waites shared the amazing story of how everything came together. Her passion for American music, and curiosity about underperformed composers, sparked initially during her master's degree studies at Yale in the 1960s. After graduation, "I remember reading Barbara Garvey Jackson's article in 1977, from *The Black Perspective in Music*,"<sup>5</sup> she explained. "I happened to hear about it from a colleague of mine who was teaching at U Mass in Amherst. She said 'Oh, this is something that you should really check out, Althea.' But it goes back further. The other thing that connected me to Florence Price came many years before, when I was an undergraduate at Xavier University in New Orleans. William Grant Still came to our campus to do master classes and workshops. This was at the time he guest-conducted the New Orleans Philharmonic. He mentioned Florence Price to us."

Waites had a great aunt in New Orleans, also a pianist, from whom she inherited boxes of vintage 1920s issues of *Etude* magazine. After moving cross-country to California, unpacking boxes, she made a chance

discovery. "I found (an issue of *Etude*) in one of my boxes," Waites recalled, "and in it was a piece by Price called *The Old Boatman*. And I thought, 'Oh, this is interesting, . . . Florence Price.'"

Several years later, Waites attended the 1985 Black American Music Symposium at the University of Michigan. She recounts, "I met Eileen Southern, who had written, *The Music of Black Americans* . . . and Rae Linda Brown (working on her Yale dissertation on Price's orchestral music). Rae Linda suggested that I get a copy of the (sonata) manuscript from



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the Library of Congress." It was Lance Bowling, the founder of Cambria Records in California, who provided her with the score for *Dances in the Canebrakes*, and encouragement for the recording project. It takes a village to make a ground-breaking recording!<sup>6</sup>

Barbara Garvey Jackson founded ClarNan Editions in 1984. The company name draws on two famous composers, Clara Schumann and Nannerl Mozart, and the focus is publishing music by historic women composers. Prof. Calvert Johnson, organ faculty at Agnes Scott College, played a key role in adding Price's music to the ClarNan catalog. "He got in touch. He had been collecting from around the country every scrap of organ music by Price that he could find.

He wanted to publish them, and I was overjoyed!" Four volumes of organ music were ClarNan Edition's first Price publications.

The 2009 re-discovery of a cache of papers and manuscripts at an abandoned house in St. Anne, IL was another cause for rejoicing by Price devotees. The story of the abandoned house is shared in fascinating detail in the radio documentary, *Gathering the Pieces: the Florence Price Legacy*. (Editor's note: links to this and other documentaries on Price can be found at [ClavierCompanion.com](http://ClavierCompanion.com).) The Price Archives in Fayetteville acquired a large number of additional materials. ClarNan now publishes piano music (concert works and teaching pieces), arts songs, and organ music by Florence Price.

Althea Waites has championed the music of Florence Price internationally, most recently at the 2017 National Festival of the Arts in Grahamstown, South Africa, playing the Sonata in E Minor. Reflecting on the significance of Price's accomplishments, Waites remarked, "I certainly admire her courage and her resilience. The fact that she was able—in an era when there was so much opposition—she was able to thrive. She had a great career, having her music performed at a time when most women were simply not being given any kind of recognition in that regard. Florence Price stands out to me as a tremendous source of inspiration."



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The study of composer Florence Price became the life's work of the late Dr. Rae Linda Brown. Her compelling, authoritative biography of Price, *The Heart of a Woman*, will be published by the University of Illinois Press. ▲

## Currently Available Publications of Florence Price's Piano Music

### ClarNan Editions

**Music of the African Diaspora**, volumes 1 – 3, Oxford University Press

**Black Women Composers. A Century of Piano Music (1893-1990)**, Hildegard Press

**Sonata in E Minor**, G. Schirmer

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Margot Lee Shatterly, *Hidden Figures. The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 2016), 196.

<sup>2</sup>Rae Linda Brown, Preface to the published score for Symphonies nos. 1 and 3 by Florence Price, "Lifting the Veil: the Symphonies of Florence B. Price." (Middleton, Wisconsin: A-R Editions, 2008), xvi

<sup>3</sup>Judith Anne Still and Mrs. Judy Anne Headlee, "Carrie Still Shepperson: the Hollows of her Footsteps," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 42 no. 1, (Spring 1983): 44.

<sup>4</sup>In a gesture to redress this wrong, in 2018 the Arkansas State Music Teachers Association named Florence Price an MTNA Foundation Fellow.

<sup>5</sup>Barbara Garvey Jackson, "Florence Price, Composer," *The Black Perspective in Music*. Vol. 5 no. 1, (Spring 1977): 30 – 43.

<sup>6</sup>Rae Linda Brown finally persuaded G. Schirmer to publish the Price sonata in 1998.



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