

Florence B. Price

Florence Bea(trice) Price was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, on 9 April 1887. She began learning music from her mother at an early age and gave her first piano performance at age four, reportedly publishing a composition (now lost) at age eleven. She graduated high school at the age of sixteen and in that same year was accepted into the New England Conservatory (Boston), then as now one of the most prestigious musical academies in the U.S.

More than any other instrument or ensemble, the piano was the primary outlet for Price's inexhaustible musical imagination. It was the instrument on which she received her earliest musical education and it, together with the organ, was the focal point of her education at the New England Conservatory (Boston), where she completed two diplomas at the age of nineteen in 1906. It was the centerpiece of her music teaching at the Cotton Plant Academy (a large co-educational boarding school near Arkadelphia, Arkansas for Black Americans) from 1906 to 1910, and of her work as head of the Music Department of Atlanta University from 1910-1912. And she taught piano privately from 1912 until only months before her death in 1953 – not only to dozens of beginning, intermediate, and advanced students in Arkansas and her adopted hometown of Chicago, but also to her own daughters. Aside from the music she wrote for the instrument, one of the most telling (and charming) indications of the centrality of the piano to her identity as musician is an undated ink drawing found among the Florence Price papers in the Libraries of the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville – a competent drawing, apparently in a youthful hand, of a piano in a domestic room of some sort, lid up, bearing the caption: MY CAREER.

Small wonder, then, that compositions for piano make up some 216 of Price's total surviving output of 458 works – about 47%, more than any other single category, followed next by songs and arrangements of spirituals (all of which also include piano). Nor is it surprising that it was a composition for piano (the suite *In the Land o' Cotton*, presented on this album) that secured her recognition as a composer – a tie for second prize in the Holstein Competition sponsored by *Opportunity* Magazine in 1926 – or that it was piano compositions that fueled her rising renown in the early 1930s: a *Cotton Dance* won honorable mention in the Rodman Wanamaker Composition Competition for Composers of the Negro Race in 1931; her Piano Sonata (included on this album) and fourth (B-minor) *Fantasia nègre* won prizes in the same competition in 1932; and her Piano Concerto in One Movement was performed three times in 1933-34: at the commencement exercises of Chicago Musical College and the national convention of the National Association of Negro Musicians (both of these with Price herself as soloist), and with the Woman's Symphony Orchestra of Chicago at the *Century of Progress World's Fair* in 1934 (this with Margaret Bonds as soloist). The Preludes included on the present album date from these early years, and in fact the only complete autograph of the set survives in the papers of Margaret Bonds now found in the Georgetown University Libraries (Washington, D.C.).

Florence Price's style began to change in the late 1930s, more overtly embracing modernist idioms in addition to the Afro-Romantic ones that characterized her earlier works – but the piano remained her constant musical companion to the end, with lyrical gems such as the *Three Roses* and *Your Hands in Mine* and evocative masterworks such as *Clouds*, the *Scenes in Tin Can Alley*, and her final major suite, *Snapshots*, rounding out the compositional products of her lifelong love of the instrument. She was preparing to leave to receive an award in France when she was hospitalized in May, 1953. She died of a cerebral hemorrhage on 3 June – leaving behind a handful of published works and hundreds of unpublished ones that are only now beginning to become known.

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