

## A guide to Florence Price

Composer Florence Price became the first African-American woman to have a symphony performed by a major American orchestra



By **Freya Parr**

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Florence B Price, née Smith, was a composer, pianist and organist, thought to be the first female symphonist of African-American heritage. She composed over 300 works – symphonies, chamber works and songs noted for their lush orchestration and enchanting lyricism – that were performed by leading orchestras and performers, including the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and contralto Marian Anderson.

So why has such a figure remained on the fringes of 20th-century music? In 1,000 years of classical musicology, there is barely a mention of composers of colour, even though these musicians have contributed significantly to the evolution of the genre. Florence Price is just one of a plethora of such composers that have been overlooked.

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### Upbringing

Price's life was typical of that lived by middle-class African Americans at the turn of the 20th century. The youngest of three, Florence was born in Little Rock, Arkansas on 9 April 1888 to James and Florence Irene Smith. It was a time when anyone of African heritage in North America was seen as an under-class, no matter their status, so the impact of her remarkable parents can never be underestimated.

The young Smith's mother was a wily entrepreneur who ran a restaurant, sold property and served as secretary of the International Loan and Trust Company. She was also a music teacher and taught her daughter the piano. Florence's father, Dr James Smith, was a notable dentist and inventor of patented dental implements.

He was possibly the only African-American dentist in Little Rock at that time and, because of his colour, had to overcome innumerable hurdles to qualify. He was also a successful painter who exhibited at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.

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Florence Smith, however, grew up at a time and place in the American South where middle-class African-American families could at least progress to a limited degree, which was certainly not the case for African Americans in other parts of the US. It may have been a coincidence, but a comparably noted African-American composer, William Grant Still, was one of Price's classmates. Charlotte Stephens, who over a 70-year teaching career influenced many notable alumni in other fields of endeavour, taught both Smith and Still, as well as the equally-noted composer, William Dawson.

Clearly gifted, the Smith family was considered to be one of the '10 percenters', people that, according to the Harlem Renaissance philosopher and activist W. E. B. Du Bois, had benefited from a classical education and who had the potential to lead American society.

At their Little Rock home, Smith's parents hosted many gatherings of African-American intelligentsia, including the piano prodigy 'Blind' Tom Wiggins, Du Bois himself and educator Booker T Washington. The young Florence, steeped in the tenets of the Harlem Renaissance that coursed through the veins of the '10 percenters', entertained her parents' high-profile guests on the piano.

It was an exciting time, with the blossoming of an African-American belief in equal opportunity and equal cultural value as promoted by

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## Pursuing music

At the age of 14, Smith graduated as high school valedictorian and two years later, in 1903, left Little Rock to attend the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, Massachusetts where there were only one or two other students of colour (she won her place after following her mother's advice to present herself as being of Mexican descent).

In just three years at the conservatory, she gained a soloist's diploma in organ and a teacher's diploma in piano, and she was the only one of 2,000 students to pursue a double-major in organ and piano. The principal, George Whitefield Chadwick, encouraged Florence to compose, which turned out to be life-changing advice. She took lessons in composition and counterpoint with composer Benjamin Cutter in her spare time and her early works included pieces for piano and organ.

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After graduating, Florence Smith returned to the American South to teach in the town of Cotton Plant at the Arkadelphia Presbyterian Academy for a year and then at Little Rock's Shorter College. In 1910 she moved to Atlanta, Georgia and soon became head of the music department at Clark University, staying there until 1912. It was, again, a tremendous achievement for a woman at that time. Smith returned to Little Rock in 1912 to marry attorney Thomas Jewell Price on 25 September.

The couple had two daughters and one son, who died in infancy. Price (now her married name) was heartbroken and composed the song *To My Little Son* in remembrance of him. Her husband worked with the highly respected law firm owned by Scipio Jones, known for successfully defending the appeals of 12 black men sentenced to death following the Elaine Massacre of 1919.

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## Facing prejudice

The notorious Jim Crow law (1877-1954) permeated life in the American South at the time and kept African Americans subjugated and voiceless. Any aspiration was stifled and achievements negated in American daily life.

So despite her qualifications, Price was denied membership to the Arkansas State Music Teachers Association. Instead, she established her own music studio, teaching the piano, music theory and composing short teaching pieces for her students. Additionally, to counter her rejection, she founded the Little Rock Club of Musicians. But racial problems continued to escalate in Little Rock, leading to the lynching of several African-American men in 1927. The Prices fled to Chicago for their safety and for a better quality of life.

Price's husband, however, had difficulty finding work in Chicago, and financial struggles led to their divorce in 1931. Price became a single mother to her two daughters and, to make ends meet, played the organ for silent film screenings and wrote popular songs for WGN radio ads under the pen name Vee Jay.

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## Beginnings of success

She joined the R Nathaniel Dett Club of Music and the Allied Arts to gain friendships with like-minded musicians and artists and continued her composition studies at institutions such as the American Conservatory of Music, the Chicago Teachers College, the University of Chicago and the Chicago Musical College. While studying composition and orchestration with Carl Busch and Wesley LaViolette, her beginner piano pieces were published by G Schirmer and the McKinley Music Company.

All the while, Price continued to enter composing competitions with some success, including newly-established awards for black musicians and second place in the 1925 and 1927 Holstein Prize for composition. Eventually, her concert music came to the attention of one of her teachers, the composer and organist Leo Sowerby, who became one of her great champions.

In 1932 her big break finally arrived when she won several prizes at the Wanamaker Music Composition Contest: first prize in the orchestral category for her *Symphony in E minor* (1931-2), first prize for her *Piano Sonata* (1931) in the solo instrumental category, with the orchestral work *Ethiopia's Shadow in America* and the *Piano Fantasia* mentioned in dispatches.

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## The first symphony

Her successes attracted the attention of Frederick Stock, the music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. He conducted a

The work, originally nicknamed 'Negro Symphony', is nearly 40 minutes long and is imbued with African-American spirituals – Price's music would go on to be steeped in both European and African-American musical and cultural elements including rhythmic syncopation, spiritual melodies, gospel church music, polyphony, references to African dances, blue notes, the pentatonic scale and African instruments such as the marimba.

Florence Price made significant friendships during the 1930s, including with the pianist and composer Margaret Bonds and the contralto Marian Anderson and the writer Langston Hughes. Anderson, who had sung her spiritual arrangement of 'My Soul's Been Anchored in the Lord' in a broadcast from Prague on 6 May 1937, performed the song at the end of her programme at her renowned Lincoln Memorial concert on Easter Sunday in 1939. With 75,000 people attending the performance and many more listening on the radio, Price won overnight fame.

So it's something of a mystery as to why Price couldn't get her First Symphony published, despite nationwide performances. It spurred her on to send a letter to the conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. 'My dear Dr Koussevitzky,' she wrote. 'To begin with I have two handicaps – those of sex and race. I am a woman with some Negro blood in my veins. Knowing the worst then, would you be good enough to hold in check the possible inclination to regards a woman's composition as long on emotionalism but short of virility...'

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## Unsung genius

Even with her relative success, Price struggled to keep a roof over her head and was saved from destitution by friends. She suffered from poor health for most of her adult life and was often in hospital. In May 1953, however, her work was gaining momentum, and she was about to fly to Europe to promote her music when she suffered a heart attack and died on 3 June 1953.

Performances of her work declined from the late 1950s, but in the last few years there has been a resurgence. Notable advocates include the New Black Music Repertory Ensemble, the pianist Karen Walwyn, the violinist Er-Gene Kahng and Apo Hsu, director and conductor of The Women's Philharmonic.

Emeritus Professor James Greeson has made an insightful film about her life, and the academic Professor Rae Linda Brown, who died last year, has written a biography. The time may have come when the roots of 'a truly American art music' will be re-examined and composers such as Florence Price will gain their true place among the great American composers.

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Words by Shirley Thompson. This article first appeared in the March 2018 issue of BBC Music Magazine.



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Freya Parr is BBC Music Magazine's Digital Editor and Staff Writer. She has also written for titles including the Guardian, Circus Journal, Frankie and Suitcase Magazine, and runs The Noiseletter, a fortnightly arts and culture publication. Freya's main areas of interest and research lie in 20th-century and contemporary music.





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