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An Overdue Ovation for

INSTAGRAM

Florence Price

by Heather Honaker

(mailto:heatherphonaker@gmail.com) on **September 29, 2021**

Categories: Print (<https://www.littlerocksoiree.com/category/1091/print>), Little Rock, Big Hero (<https://www.littlerocksoiree.com/category/55434/little-rock-big-hero>)



Photo of **FLORENCE PRICE** by G. Nelidoff, courtesy of the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra.

“I am a woman, and I have some Negro blood in my veins – and you will understand some of the difficulties that confront one in such a position. Please judge my music on its own merit,” wrote Florence Price to Boston Symphony



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APR 16 First Annual
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conductor Serge Koussevitzky in 1943.

Price was born a Little Rock native in 1887 into a mixed-race family at 2100 Broadway. Her father was the only Black dentist in town, and her mother was a music teacher. She began playing the piano and composing music at 3 years old, and at 11, published her first work. She graduated valedictorian of Capitol Hill High School at the age of 14 and went on to study at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston at 16.



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One of only three Black students at the conservatory, Price was counseled by her mother to list her hometown as Pueblo, Mexico, to conceal her race. She graduated with honors in three years with a double-major in organ performance and piano teaching.

After school, she came home to teach at Cotton Plant Academy and then Shorter College before moving to Atlanta to become head of the Clark College

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Music Department. In 1912, she returned to Little Rock to marry attorney Thomas Price and raise a family.

Racial tensions caused them to move to Chicago in 1927, and it wasn't long before she and her husband divorced. There, she attended classes to perfect her craft, played the organ for silent film screenings and wrote songs for radio ads.

In 1933, her Symphony No. 1 in E Minor won first prize in the Wanamaker Music Competition. This grabbed the attention of Frederick Stock, conductor of the Chicago Symphony, and the orchestra premiered the piece, making her the first Black female composer to have a symphony performed by a major American orchestra. Other pieces of hers were then featured at the Chicago World's Fair and with the Detroit Symphony.

Price was also known for her spiritual music arrangements. Marian Anderson, the first Black person to sing with the Metropolitan Opera, closed her historic 1939 concert at the Lincoln Memorial with Price's "My Soul's Been Anchored in the Lord."

Price died in 1953 in Chicago. Throughout her life, she wrote, played and promoted her music, with more than 300 pieces to her credit. And though her music was heard by thousands, she never saw the status or notoriety of her white or male peers.

Europe Meets Deep South

"Price was an American nationalist," says Linda Holzer, music professor at UA Little Rock. "Like her contemporaries William Grant Still, George Gershwin and Aaron Copland, she successfully incorporated elements of Negro folk music into Western art music."

Holzer found Price's music while researching dissertation topics.

"As an American woman, I thought it would be interesting to focus on an American woman composer," she says. "I came across a recording called 'Piano Music of Florence Price.' I was curious, and I ordered the cassette

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recording for myself. It was immediate. The music of her Sonata in E Minor grabbed me.”

Holzer says the nurturing Black community in Little Rock at the turn of the 20th century is partially to credit for Price’s inspiration. She had teachers like Charlotte Andrews Stephens, who attended Oberlin Conservatory, and Carrie Still Shepperson, mother of William Grant Still, a literature teacher and an accomplished pianist who formed and directed a group of spiritual singers.

Young Price heard concert pianist Harriet Gibbs Marshall’s recital in Little Rock in 1894. The daughter of Judge Mifflin Gibbs, the first Black judge elected in the U.S., Marshall became the first Black woman to graduate from Oberlin with a degree in music.

“With powerful, accomplished women like this to look up to in her childhood, is it any surprise Florence Price seized every opportunity?” Holzer wonders.

Mike Mayton, trustee of the Stella Boyle Smith Trust and member of the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra’s music director search committee, was taken with Price’s music too.

“You can feel and hear the deep South,” says Mayton, who also serves on the National Symphony’s board. “Her orchestrations are lush and enchanting, and while so beautiful, do not seem difficult and complicated like much classical music. She was able to balance the use of traditional European symphonic structure with the traditional Southern spirituals and folk songs in a perfect way.”

A Star Rediscovered

Mayton made it his mission to bring Price’s music to the ASO’s stage, and this September, it finally happened. Thanks to the Stella Boyle Smith Trust and the Dunbar Historic Neighborhood Association, the ASO performed the world premiere of Price’s own orchestration of her Piano Concerto, and she will be the focus of the symphony’s Opus Ball on Nov. 13.

“Not every city inspired a world-class symphony composer and Little Rock did.



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ASO is very proud to claim her and it is past time for us to honor her,” CEO Christina Littlejohn says.

“Her music should have been played as much as Aaron Copland's music to demonstrate the sound of America as heard through a symphony. ... We are all so fortunate today that she continued to write music and compose, even if very few heard her music while she was alive.”

According to Mayton, after Price's death, her music largely disappeared. But in 2009 a couple purchased a house outside of St. Anne, Illinois, and were in the process of renovating it when they found a collection of musical manuscripts left by someone named Florence Price.

And for leaders like Littlejohn, the mission is clear.

“Orchestras across America are performing it as fast as we can.”

Meet Opus Co-Chairs Rick and Maureen Adkins



Longtime ASO supporters, Rick serves on the board and Maureen, a piano and music teacher for 35 years, introduced many children to their first classical music performances through ASO programs.

“ASO is investing in the lives of these young people, not just their music education,” Maureen says. “Music can truly be life-changing.”

Why honor Florence Price?

MA: I first heard about Price in my car listening to [KLRE 90.5 FM]. I was intrigued by the information that a trove of manuscripts had been found in this composer's summer house outside Chicago and now were housed at the University of Arkansas. ... And it just so happens that she was born and raised in Little Rock. I have lived in Arkansas most of my life, and I had completed a master's degree in music and never heard about Price in any college level music class.

... She never received the attention that she deserved in her lifetime. ... I had this idea that Opus Ball, held right here in her hometown, could honor Price this year. I am hoping those in attendance will leave with a new admiration for this Arkansas composer, her life and her music.

What can attendees expect at this year's ball?

RA: We're back at The Capital Hotel. We've been working with the very talented Tanarah Luxe Floral and the staff at The Capital to create an atmosphere around the time of Price's time here in Little Rock.

It will be an elegant art deco theme with an emphasis on quieter. Tanarah is making each table serve as an elegant bubble so that guests can actually converse with everyone at their table and hear each other. We want them to be able to spend a wonderful evening together, safely.