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Published by
WQXR Editorial

Florence Price Is not Your Negro





Florence Price
(WQXR)

Feb 27, 2020 · by [James Bennett II](#)

During a 2018 interview with Sam Sanders for *It's Been a Minute*, [chef Samin Nosrat](#) said that she opts to *not* appear on panels or engagements where she's the only brown guest. Because in that case, she feels, the novelty of her identity — a brown woman in a white man's game — outshines the work that she herself produces.

I kind of feel the same way when we talk about Florence Price.

To recap, composer Florence Beatrice Price is having what some would call “a moment.” Born in Little Rock in 1887, the composer was a recognized talent during her time as a student. But she also possessed a productive spirit as a composer. Despite finding it difficult to have her works programmed due to her chronic pre-existing conditions of being “black”

and “a woman,” Price had accumulated, by her own word, hundreds of unpublished manuscripts. She was the first black female composer to have a symphony premiered by a major American orchestra (her Symphony No. 1 by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1933), but after her death she languished in obscurity. I bet those pre-existing conditions had something to do with it.

That all changed in 2009, [when a collection of her unpublished works was found in a run down house near St. Anne, Illinois](#). In the years since, her work and contributions have re-entered the discourse. A publisher acquired the rights to her oeuvre in 2018; and the past few years have seen the first-ever recordings of some of her works, including two violin concertos. She’s being programmed more, too — [a 2019 Naumburg program](#) featured Price alongside Barber and Copeland and Anna Clyne; most recently the [National Philharmonic](#) has Price posted up with composers like William Grant Still and Wynton Marsalis.

Canon shakeup? Good. Visible inspiration for aspiring black composers? Great. Someone *finally* getting their props in the culture? Excellent.

But we have to protect Florence Price at all cost, lest she becomes the twofer — her work, coming from a black woman can’t be a diversity play for diversity’s sake. And when we do engage with it, we best come correct.

Musicologist Doug Shadle has been engaging with Price's work for some time now, and in a Twitter thread he recently shared, the professor explained the dangers of getting lazy with how we treat Price.

FLORENCE PRICE IN 2020 (A Mini-Thread)

1/ I just retweeted this story about the 2019 recording of Florence Price's symphonies, but it has some glaring problems. <https://t.co/QONwp5prkS>

— *Doug-Shadle (@DougShadle)* [January 8, 2020](#)

When talking about Price, it's easy to transform her story into a *Coach Carter*-esque hardscrabble narrative of overcoming obstacles and "persevering." But this veers into territory that is, at worst, factually wrong (the WPA most likely didn't "commission" her Third Symphony) or, at best, narratively irresponsible (you sure you want to situate Price's work within the white canon, or as a successor to Dvořák?)

I like Florence Price's music and am stoked to see her get her due (although I wish someone had given her those flowers when she was alive).

But corrective work takes time and concentrated effort; we can't give up on the scores of other women of color who made massive contributions to the music we love so much. I'm willing to bet, too, that a lot of it is unrecorded, or still hidden — we must be vigilant and start looking for everything that might be out there. Remember: Price's work was found in a dilapidated house on the outskirts of a small Illinois village, so we're lucky it wasn't lost forever.

Our "rediscovery" of Florence Price is a wonderful thing, but it should be the first step in rectifying issues of underrepresentation in this space. Just as *Porgy and Bess* can't be "The Black Opera" or *Moonlight* can't be "The Black Critically-Acclaimed Oscar Winner," Price can't become your two-for-one diversity play. Florence Price isn't to be messed with, because Florence Price ain't your negro.

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