

Brown, Rae Linda. 2020. *The Heart of a Woman: The Life and Music of Florence B. Price*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

Reviewed by Lauren Shepherd

The recent calls to diversify the classical Western canon have permeated all areas of music scholarship. In answering these calls, many invoke the name of Florence B. Price (née Smith; 1887-1953), an African American composer and pianist whose career spanned the first half of the twentieth century. Though some may be familiar with her larger symphonic works (thanks to publicity from Alex Ross [2018] and other journalists), this monograph marks the first full scholarly biography focused entirely on Price. In light of the ongoing work of the Black Lives Matter movement and the greater push to include a more diverse musical repertoire in classrooms and concert halls, the 2020 publication of a biography of the first African American woman to find success as a composer in America seems particularly timely.

In *The Heart of a Woman: The Life and Music of Florence B. Price*, Rae Linda Brown exceeds the expectations of a typical biographer. Brown frames Florence B. Price's life within the broader context of African American culture to "place the music of Florence Price in the proper musical and historical perspective" (1). Delightfully thorough yet succinct, this biography carefully considers how the interwoven and conflicting issues of gender, race, and class impacted Price. By examining not just Price's life but the social and political cultures around it, Brown pushes beyond the standard biographical question of "Who was Florence Price?" to investigate the complex racial and gendered prejudices that influenced Price's compositional output. Brown takes advantage of all available archival material throughout the monograph: Whether using personal interviews from Price's life or interpreting documents and letters contained within the archives, Brown carefully and graciously untangles the complex narratives surrounding Price's public success and rather private personal life.

Published posthumously and edited by Brown's former research assistant and current Professor of Music at the University of Pennsylvania, Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *The Heart of a Woman* provides an interdisciplinary perspective on Price's life. Not only is this a must-read for anyone wanting to learn more about

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Price herself or the culture surrounding African Americans of her generation, but it is also paramount for any scholar of American music, posing many avenues of inquiry for further exploration into Price's life and archive within a larger cultural framework. Scholars interested in American nationalism, African American life and culture at the turn of the twentieth century, the Harlem Renaissance, or the Chicago Renaissance will benefit from this study of Price's life. As Ramsey states in the Foreword, "*The Heart of a Woman* can be considered a contemporary statement on black feminist thought" (xiv).

Brown chronologically tells Price's story by separating the monograph into two larger sections: Part 1, "Southern Roots" (chapters 1-6); and Part 2, "The 'Dean' of Negro Composers of the Midwest" (chapters 7-19). This sectioning also separates Price's life geographically between Little Rock, Arkansas and Chicago rather than strictly by her compositional output. Chapter 1 ("Family Ties") and Chapter 2 ("Little Rock: 'The Negro Paradise'") feature little information on Florence Beatrice herself. Instead, these chapters provide a colorful and complete tapestry of family and cultural history against which we can view and understand Price's life. Focusing on Price's relationship with her mother, Florence Irene, Chapter 2 unpacks how Florence Irene's conflicting attitudes toward both race and class impacted young Florence Beatrice. For example, Florence Irene wanted "desperately to emulate whites" and sought to display her upper-class status through elaborate clothing. This occasionally alienated the Price household from close friends and family (31). Chapter 3 ("Pursuit of Education: Elementary and High School") explores Price's segregated elementary and high school experiences. This chapter contains a charming depiction of a young girl who gives up aspirations of becoming a doctor—a field dominated by men at the turn of the century—to pursue a career in composition, a field in which only three American women had achieved success in having large-scale works performed. In Chapter 4 ("The New England Conservatory of Music"), Brown paints a broader history of life in Boston during the period in which Price attended the New England Conservatory of Music (NEC), describing a longer thread of Black progress occurring in America around this time. Price began her studies as a piano and organ major and did not begin composing until later in her tenure at the NEC. During her time as a student, Price composed music "based on Negro folk music," including a string trio and her first symphony (52). Unfortunately, neither of these scores survive today.

In Chapter 5 ("Return to Little Rock"), Brown discusses Price's determination to become independent and find herself after she graduated from the NEC and returned to Little Rock. During this time, her father passed away

and her mother subsequently departed from Little Rock. Price then took a position as the director of the music program at Clark University, which is described in Chapter 6 (“Clark University and Marriage”). Under her leadership, “students developed their talents, and their cultural awareness was extended from the campus into the community” (67). The first musical example— included in Chapter 6—details a song titled “To My Little Son” that Price wrote for her first-born son, Tommy. Through this example, Brown demonstrates Price’s ability to engage with Romantic-style art song composition through text painting and chromatic harmonies while also describing one of the personal hardships Price faced while composing: her son died while he was just an infant (70-1). As racial tensions in Little Rock worsened and the safety of her family came under threat, Price fled to Chicago with her two young daughters in late 1927 (77). Brown concludes Part I with the chilling retelling of the reason Price and her family fled from Little Rock: a young white child, allegedly killed by a Black man, caused whites in the community to want to kill “a ‘comparable’ black child” from a prominent family (77). Price and her daughters became an easy target for the mob. They quickly fled to Chicago as racial tensions continued to worsen in Little Rock.

Brown discusses Price’s early life in Chicago in Chapters 7 (“VeeJay and the Black Metropolis”) and 8 (“My Soul’s Been Anchored in de Lord”). In Chapter 7, Brown describes the appeal of Chicago to many African Americans in the 1920s, including its thriving jazz and cultural scenes (81-83). Brown also details the struggles Price faced in publishing her piano music during these early years (89), noting that Price began to write Tin Pan Alley-style popular music under the pen name “VeeJay” (90). Despite her foray into popular music, Price did not give up on writing in a range of different styles. For example, Brown provides analyses of existing spirituals to conclude Chapter 7. These analyses create a natural transition to Chapter 8, which explores her most popular spiritual, “My Soul’s Been Anchored in de Lord.” This chapter also depicts a crumbling household: as the Great Depression shook America, Florence’s husband, Thomas Price, struggled to maintain employment and became violent towards Florence (98-100). Desperate for income, Price began accompanying silent films on the organ in “The Stroll” in Chicago (99). The divorce between Florence and Thomas was finalized in January 1931 (101). After the divorce, further information on Thomas Price cannot be found, one of the many holes Brown describes in this archive. Florence quickly married to Pusey Dell Arnett, an insurance worker who provided a great deal of care and financial security for Florence and her daughters, wedding him on Valentine’s Day, 1931 (101). Price

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then began composing her First Symphony in E Minor, her largest work to date. She submitted the symphony, a tone poem titled *Ethiopia's Shadow in America*, the Piano Sonata in E Minor, and *Fantasia No. 4* to the Rodman Wanamaker Prize competition (103). The Symphony in E Minor and the Piano Sonata in E Minor won first prize in their respective categories (104). Brown positions this public recognition of Price's talent as a revolutionary moment in her life.

In Chapter 9 ("Black Satin Clothes at the Fair"), Brown describes how Price adapted to white musical spaces after receiving national attention from her success at the Wanamaker awards. Examples include Price orchestrating music for Louis White's radio broadcasts on WGN radio (110) and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra premiering Price's First Symphony in E minor. This dissemination of Price's works notably inspired a younger generation of African American women composers and pianists—namely Margaret Bonds. Brown details young Bonds' musical endeavors throughout this chapter, noting that Bonds and Price often performed together on various programs and concerts.

Although Price had received national attention by 1933, it was the white press, in fact, that validated Price as a serious classical music composer, while many African American reviewers of Price's concerts failed to mention Price by name. Brown suggests that this hesitance to name Price came at the expense of highlighting the cultural and social significance of African Americans advancing the race to the elite classical music world (116). In Chapter 10 ("Spirituals to Symphonies"), Brown describes the critical reception of Price's works and emphasizes the fact that Price was one of very few African American composers to write large-scale classical music forms, such as symphonies and concertos, during this time.

Chapters 11 ("The Symphony in E Minor"), 13 ("The Piano Concerto in One Movement"), and 18 ("The Symphony No. 3") contain historical background to and analyses of Price's large-scale works. Brown describes form, harmony, orchestration, compositional inspiration, premieres, and unique personal challenges for Price within each of these works.

Brown's analysis of *The Symphony in E Minor* notes that the work contains mostly standard formal procedures and orchestration, albeit with a slightly expanded percussion section. However, Brown draws attention to the use of the minor pentatonic scale in the primary theme of the sonata form opening, which she notes is "the most frequently used scale in Afro-American folk songs" (128). A hymn-based second movement features a harmonic and melodic shift from a folk-music idiom to an instrumental four-part chorus accompanied by driving African drums and tympani (130). Brown suggests that

the first two movements of the symphony strongly emulate Dvořák in terms of their orchestration, harmonies, and formal properties. The third movement of the symphony is not a traditional symphonic scherzo but a “Juba Dance”—the title of this movement—in rondo form, which is an antebellum folk dance with intricate patterns of “foot-tapping, hand-clapping, and thigh-slapping” (131). Brown describes the fourth movement (“Finale”) as “the most straightforward” (133) and only affords the movement one brief paragraph before describing the symphony’s reception. Brown notes that Alain Locke, a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance, was quite critical of Price and her symphony, lambasting the composer for not including direct racial references such as of quotations of Black folk themes or a blues progression (133). Brown argues, however, that we should shift away from Locke’s quantitative approach to analyzing the symphony to a more qualitative perspective. This qualitative perspective provides a broader understanding of Price’s use of Black folk idioms, widening the scope of the Black music tradition: “An impartial examination of Price’s symphony reveals that she does not abandon her African American heritage. Rather, the symphony inherently incorporates many aspects of the black music tradition within a Euro-American medium—orchestral music” (137).

The *Piano Concerto in One Movement* established a strong connection between Price and the Women’s Symphony Orchestra of Chicago, who performed her concerto with Margaret Bonds as soloist on October 12, 1934 (158). Brown parses the concerto into three larger sections that reflect the three movements of a typical concerto, demonstrating, once again, how Price masterfully blends the Romantic tradition with African American melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic influences (159-160). Two forms of the manuscript exist today: one arrangement for solo piano and orchestral reduction; one arranged for two pianos. From these two scores, Brown suggests, the original Romantic-era orchestration can be extrapolated (160), though Brown herself relies on suggested orchestration alongside the piano reduction within her own examples. The first movement varies from traditional concerto form in that both primary themes are introduced by the orchestra in a double exposition (160). Brown argues that Price waits until the development section to reveal her unique harmonic and rhythmic language (162). Since the first section omits a traditional cadenza and recapitulation, the soloist instead demonstrates their virtuosity in the development section. Price brings in the Juba dance once again for the third section, a further testament to the truly idiosyncratic structure of this one-movement concerto.

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Brown's analysis of Symphony No. 3 highlights the stylistic development from Price's earlier works, noting a new tendency to set melodic material in a number of different ways to create a lush, more elaborate textures (208-209). The primary theme of the first movement moves markedly away from the pentatonic scales featured in her earlier symphony to a more ambiguous tonal setting, creating ample material for the development section. Price embarks on a "41-measure Beethovenian coda" (211) in the recapitulation, a sign, according to Brown, of Price's newly advanced approach to form. The second and third movements directly echo her Symphony in E Minor, taking inspiration from a hymn and juba, respectively. In a letter to Serge Koussevitzky on September 18, 1941, Price writes that she "tried to portray a cross section of Negro life and psychology as it is today, influenced by urban life north of the Mason and Dixon line. It is not 'program' music" (218). For Brown, this letter reveals that Price was cognizant of her developments as a composer, deliberately adopting an even more modern approach to using Black musical materials.

Though Brown is thorough in her formal, thematic, and tonal analyses of each work, it is not always clear why Brown chose certain musical examples to put alongside the prose and not others. There were moments described in the text where seeing a score would have strengthened Brown's analysis—particularly in her analysis of the recapitulation and coda of the first movement of Price's Symphony No. 3 (218). Brown only includes printed examples of the primary and secondary theme groups for this symphony. Given that Brown discovered this symphony during her graduate studies at Yale, a longer and more thorough description of this piece would have better contextualized it within the book. Instead, this analysis is the shortest of the large-scale analyses. Perhaps these omissions will encourage future scholars to continue where Brown left off, further tracking theme groups and key areas throughout the symphony. There is still room for an even more detailed close reading of this movement in particular, as well as with all of Price's large-scale works.

Chapters 14 ("Performing Again"), 15 ("Professional Recognition: Reconciling Gender, Class, and Race") and 16 ("The WPA Years") detail aspects of Price's later personal life, including her separation from her second husband (169). Despite receiving national attention, Price experienced significant financial hardship during this time and turned to performing for additional income. While Price continued to compose a great deal during the late 1930s, none of her music was copyrighted and, therefore, she did not earn performance royalties. It was not until 1940, six years after her initial inquiry and application, that Price became a member of the American Society of Composers, Authors and

Publishers (ASCAP) (181). Price continued to work in white musical spaces: Brown suggests the main reason Price was able to do so was because Price was “a nonthreatening, genteel black woman,” which were “attractive qualities that white America did not always associate with black Americans” (183). This led to Price composing under the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Composers’ Forum Laboratory. Brown notes that some of the music that Price wrote does not survive; however, Price’s *Fantasia Negre* No. 4 in B Minor has recently been found and recorded, and Wise Music Classical even sells a commercial score.

In Chapter 19 (“Final Years: *The Heart of a Woman*”), Brown artfully shifts the tragic narrative of a composer fighting for recognition and struggling to secure repeat performances of her symphonies and concertos outside of Chicago and Michigan towards a narrative of success in a larger trajectory of American concert music. Although Price may have been dissatisfied with her own compositional output and disappointed that she was excluded in certain circles, Brown argues that, when seen within the broader history of race and gender in the United States, Price’s career was incredibly successful and her music contributed greatly to African American musical and social progress during her lifetime. Price broke through many barriers, her gracious and tenacious nature allowing for performances of her works by the Chicago Symphony and even the U.S. Marine Band (233) before her untimely death from heart failure on June 3, 1953 (235-236).

This detailed monograph opens several avenues for further exploration. For example, Brown suggests that Price wrote many art songs in the later years of her life due to the ease of commissioning pieces for smaller ensembles during the Great Depression. However, Brown analyzes just two of the 100 existing songs (“The Heart of a Woman” and “Sympathy”) in great detail (221). To ensure Price’s music is not forgotten again, an extensive analysis of all of these songs is called for, one of which might explore their pedagogical application for singers of different ability (since Price herself was an educator throughout her career). This pedagogical approach deserves to be applied to all of Price’s existing compositional output: In the music theory classroom, her symphonies and piano works could provide new perspectives on late Romantic and early twentieth-century music, and could serve as exemplars when teaching counterpoint; in the music history classroom, Price’s works might show how African American folk idioms were integrated into classical music and might fit into larger discussions around the construction of an American nationalist music in the early twentieth century; and, in the piano studio, Price’s piano works may yield new pedagogical

insights for beginners to professionals alike, from her early piano methods books and smaller compositions all the way to her Piano Concerto in One Movement.

In addition to the biographical and musical analyses, the book also contains a list of known recordings of Price's works, information about the Price archives and their various housings, the sources used for compiling the biography, and suggestions for further readings. Though these lists are brief, they instill the hope that there may be future recordings of Price's music and open numerous avenues for further exploration: these resources make further research into Price's life and work all the more possible. Throughout the biography, Brown articulates almost everything that is already known about Price's life, but much work remains to be done on the subsequent reception and impact of Price's music. Since Rae Linda Brown's death in 2017, more of Price's works have been found and performed, such as Symphony No. 4, a work that was never performed during Price's life (Smith 2018). Though *The Heart of a Woman* provides an abundant foundation of information about Price's life, the Symphony No. 4 demonstrates that further work needs to be done and more music is waiting to be discovered.

Given the strong groundwork found in *The Heart of a Woman*, I argue (following Baranello [2018] and Jones [2019]) that the greatest priority for Price scholars now is sociopolitical critique—in particular, an exploration of how and why Price's music was forgotten after her death, and what it means for the classical music world to “rediscover” her music and consider it part of the canon. As musicologist Douglas Shadle (2019) suggests in a *NewMusicBox* post, “within the complex matrix of composers, publishers, venues, performers, audiences, and critics, we must all play a role in creating a just musical community. Or we will keep repeating the same patterns of oppression.” Though Shadle does not include the role of music scholars in creating this community, music scholars must continue to orient their scholarship towards other living BIPOC and marginalized composers to ensure that these great artists do not only achieve success posthumously. For this one brilliant example of (re)discovery, there are dozens of other forgotten African American women composers. We might also reflect on how including Price in the Western canon changes the narrative surrounding the desire for American nationalist music during the twentieth century. It may not be the case that Price neatly fits into the Western Art Music canon, as many scholars and journalists suggest. Instead, if we view her life and compositional output in the way Brown suggests, Price disrupts and challenges the gatekeepers and Eurocentric framing of the classical canon altogether.

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