

Reviews

The Heart of a Woman: The Life and Music of Florence B. Price, by Rae Linda Brown. Music in American Life. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2020. xxiii, 295 pp.

“This is a huge find,” emphasized Rae Linda Brown as she discussed the 2009 discovery of numerous scores by Florence B. Price (1887–1953), previously thought to be lost but now reunited with the composer’s other materials at the University of Arkansas.¹ She continued,

[T]his is really significant for American music. Florence Price was writing primarily in the 1930s and in the 1940s and this is a pivotal time in American music history. It’s when American composers come into their own. So with these pieces, we now can finish this story. We can talk about what a sustained career looks like for an American composer, for a female composer, for an African American composer of the South; and the University of Arkansas Special Collections is going to be the heart of that story.

So, too, is Brown’s long-awaited monograph, published three years after the author’s passing. In conjunction with the current resurgence of interest in Price’s music, it contributes a new chapter to Price’s posthumous narrative—one that connects the lives of the composer and the historian. *The Heart of a Woman* aims to render Price visible “by offering a peek into the private sphere of African American culture, a cultural space that receives little attention in scholarship and popular discourse” (p. 2). However, the foreword and afterword by, respectively, Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr. (Brown’s former research assistant, friend, and editor) and Carlene J. Brown (Brown’s sister) render visible the concerted efforts of a black female scholar to illuminate this history. Their framings shed light on Price’s and Brown’s entwined trajectories, beginning with the moment Brown came across Price’s Symphony no. 3 in C Minor during her graduate study at Yale in 1979 and continuing to the time of her death in August 2017, shortly before which she told her sister, “My book . . . publish it . . . it’s done. It’s finished” (p. 239). *The Heart of a Woman* thus conveys the tenacity and resilience of two groundbreaking practitioners: it is the culmination of a lifetime’s scholarship and the first monograph to tell Price’s story in such depth and breadth.

1. Rae Linda Brown, interview by James Greeson for his documentary *The Caged Bird: The Life and Music of Florence B. Price* (2015), June 4, 2014 (video of interview currently available online: “Dr. Rae Linda Brown on the Florence Price Music Discovery”).

Brown presents Price's biography in two parts. The first, titled "Southern Roots," traces Price's family tree as far back as records allow. It depicts Price's upbringing in Little Rock, Arkansas, her studies at the New England Conservatory of Music, and her return to the South, with an emphasis on her roles as a mother, wife, and educator. The second, titled "The 'Dean' of Negro Composers of the Midwest," focuses on Price's activity in Chicago from the late 1920s to her final years. As Price the composer emerges to a greater extent in the second half of the book, Brown increasingly prioritizes the composer's audibility; works such as the Symphony no. 1 in E Minor, *Piano Concerto in One Movement*, and Symphony no. 3 in C Minor inspire chapters of their own. Brown moves from exploring how Price fitted into her era and environment in part 1 to emphasizing Price's agency in part 2. Unlike part 1, which draws more heavily upon the broader chronology of American cultural history (the Civil War, Reconstruction, Jim Crow), part 2 mainly tells Price's story through "major events in her life (for example, the first performance of her Symphony in E Minor with the Chicago Symphony)" and "the major institutions with which she was affiliated (the Woman's Symphony Orchestra of Chicago, the National Association of Negro Musicians, and the WPA ensembles)" (p. xxiii). The result is a dynamic unfolding of the way in which Price actively shaped Chicago's cultural scene and transformed the nation's musical landscape.

Brown's broader contextual approach in the first half of the book sets the stage for an exploration of racial politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She foregrounds the complexities, nuances, and implications of Price's mixed racial heritage, not only in relation to the dictates of the dominant culture, but also with regard to the "complex and stratified caste system" that existed within a "black social structure" (p. 4). She delves into the intraracial classist and colorist politics of the era across chapters 2–4—"Little Rock," "The Pursuit of Education," and "The New England Conservatory of Music." Her revelations concerning Price's family's privileged position as colored citizens in Little Rock are important, especially as Price continues to be praised in the public eye as the first African American woman composer to achieve national recognition with little attention to the roles that racial passing and respectability played along the way. This recalls Allyson Hobbs's observation that "African American identities are often flattened, homogenized, and reduced to a form of shorthand or a taken-for-granted concept, such as 'the black experience,' 'the black voice,' 'the black family,' and 'the black community.' But no essentialized, immutable, or true 'identity' is ever waiting to be found just below the surface."² Brown digs deeper and, as a result, manages the challenging task of unearthing Price's individual circumstances and privileges (which anticipate the composer's

2. Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 16.

relationship to the light-complected black Chicago elite, as discussed in chapter 7), and placing them in dialogue with the social, political, and economic concerns of the collective.

Brown pivots from the Great Migration to Price's path toward establishing herself in the Black Metropolis and composing her landmark Symphony no. 1 in E Minor. This entails necessary reference to the New Negro Movement, its Harlem origins, and the interconnected roles of symphonic composers William Grant Still and William Dawson (chapter 11, "The Symphony in E Minor"). There is a missed opportunity to reference Chicago's specific Negro Renaissance at this point in the narrative. Toward the end of the book, Brown rightly highlights the Chicago Renaissance (chapter 17), but she emphasizes the movement's literary foundations over the classical musical contributions to it. Considering that she thoroughly evidences Chicago's own robust black classical community and Renaissance aesthetic, beyond the shadow of its Harlem counterpart and literary parallels, what is missing, therefore, is a clear, earlier discussion of Chicago's New Negro Movement and its own distinct concert culture.

Nonetheless, Brown succeeds in making Price visible and audible within both her Chicago network and wider trends in American music. In chapter 12, "O Sing a New Song," she captures the "dizzying flurry of activity" (p. 146) that followed Price's symphonic debut with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. Here, musical analysis converges with primary source commentaries on the programs, clubs, and press that fed into this exciting period. The chapter culminates with "O Sing a New Song," a 1934 Chicago World's Fair pageant that celebrated the diversity of African American artistic achievement on a grand scale. Brown reveals that Price may have conducted her *Piano Concerto in One Movement* at the pageant, and that her mentee and friend Margaret Bonds was the soloist. Given that the dominant narrative on Price's participation in the Century of Progress Exposition centers on her symphonic debut in the hands of a white male orchestra, chapter 12 offers a vital counterpoint. It locates Price among a cast of the nation's most prominent practitioners of African descent—male and female—and shows the ways in which this triumph emerged from the sociocultural dynamics of her Chicago.

Chapter 13, "The *Piano Concerto in One Movement*," then contextualizes Price's compositional voice within its rich artistic lineage. As in the chapters on the symphonies (chapters 11 and 18), Brown elaborates on the black antebellum folk idioms and German Romantic traditions that influenced Price's writing. Her intimate knowledge of the composer's voice shines throughout: she additionally weaves excerpts from art songs, piano pieces, and organ works into a number of other chapters, and demonstrates aesthetic continuities between Price's predecessors (Antonín Dvořák, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Harry T. Burleigh) and contemporaries (R. Nathaniel Dett, Still, Dawson). Her analyses provide frameworks

for future investigations of Price's compositions according to "Afro-Romantic" (p. 8) and "Afro-modernis[t]" (p. xiv) paradigms; in recognizing the inadequacy of "traditional terminology" (p. 8), Brown proposes useful alternatives that better articulate Price's contributions to American music.³

As the monograph draws to a close, the tragedies of Price's and Brown's unfulfilled destinies imbricate. Ramsey makes the connection from the outset, noting, "Just as Florence Price died as she was about to embark on her first European trip that would prove her international acclaim, Rae Linda Brown passed away before she could see this manuscript in book form" (p. xv). We are poignantly reminded of the frequency with which historical black female figures draw greater appreciation in death than in life, and of the oft-protracted, obstacle-ridden path that lies before the black female scholar seeking to bring this history to light. There are moments in *The Heart of a Woman* that bear witness to the book's lengthy evolution, such as the reference to Josephine Wright's "recent study of black women musicians in Boston" during the late nineteenth century (p. 46), which was published in 1992, seven years before Brown submitted the first full draft of her book. There are also a number of correspondences with Brown's earlier publications, such as her "Florence B. Price's 'Negro Symphony'" chapter in the edited volume *Temples for Tomorrow* (2001) and her coedited *Florence Price: Symphonies nos. 1 and 3* (2008).⁴ *The Heart of a Woman* collages the various pieces (and stages) of Brown's research in ways that make parts of the narrative seem sectional rather than sequential, particularly in the second half of the book. This is more of an observation than a criticism, however, given that the book generates several unanswered questions as to how Brown might have organized the content had she been able to see the book through to publication. One speculation is that she might have featured more musical examples from the 2009 discovery, such as Price's chamber works and violin concertos; but the meticulousness of Brown's research makes it unlikely that the fundamental biographical content would have changed.

As Brown said in an interview, "There is nothing in those boxes that changes her biography . . . but these confirm what I learned from going through various archives. I put stuff together the hard way and now we have

3. A. Kori Hill has initiated research on Price and Afro-modernism: A. Kori Hill, "Modernist Expressions in Florence B. Price's Violin Concerto no. 2," paper presented at a meeting of the Society for American Music, New Orleans, March 2019; A. Kori Hill, "A Creation of Tradition: New Negro Modernism in the Concertos of Florence B. Price" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, forthcoming).

4. Rae Linda Brown, "Florence B. Price's 'Negro Symphony,'" in *Temples for Tomorrow: Looking Back at the Harlem Renaissance*, eds. Geneviève Fabre and Michel Feith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 84–98; Rae Linda Brown and Wayne Shirley, eds., *Florence Price: Symphonies nos. 1 and 3* (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, 2008).

discovered the same information from the notes in the boxes.”⁵ The 2009 discoveries affirmed what Brown had sensed three decades earlier from her own discovery at Yale: “There was a story and I needed to tell it” (p. 240). Yet Carlene J. Brown’s afterword makes clear that her sister never intended to have the final say on the Price narrative. As the keynote speaker at the Florence Price Music Festival (University of Arkansas, 2015), Rae Linda Brown told her audience, “the end of this story is now really the beginning. . . . It is, however, for the next generation of music scholars to delve through the music, to study it, to perform, to record it, and to tell the rest of the story” (p. 242). *The Heart of a Woman* is, undoubtedly, a gift to students and early-career scholars seeking “the tools to hear through the silences of history” (p. xi), as Brown did throughout her academic journey. But it is also a call to take Brown’s work forward, to make audible the fullness of Price’s compositional voice, and to render this resurgence into permanent visibility.

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Cursed Questions: On Music and Its Social Practices, by Richard Taruskin. Oakland: University of California Press, 2020. 450 pp.

Both the feeling of ecstasy and the belief in the supernatural powers of music distinguish musical practice and ontology in the music cultures of non-Western peoples, thus clarifying why the oral and written traditions of all these people reveal a much more intensive engagement with music and its social practices than in the modern West. For them, music is not simply beautiful or ugly, but rather good and bad; it produces responses of tension and release for both the performer and the listener. . . . Music is conceived as a form of religious experience, which, in turn, subconsciously engenders the most material musical expression.¹

5. Ashleigh Gordon, “The Life and Music of Florence Price: An Interview with Rae Linda Brown,” *Black Perspectives* (blog), African American Intellectual History Society, May 15, 2017, <https://www.aaihs.org/the-life-and-music-of-florence-price-an-interview-with-rae-linda-brown/>.

1. Robert Lachmann, *Musik des Orients* (Breslau: Ferdinand Hirt, 1929), 93: “Beides: der ekstatische Gefühlsvorgang und der Glaube an seine übernatürliche Wirkungskraft, findet sich auch in der Musikpraxis und Musikauffassung höher kultivierter Völker. Hieraus erklärt es sich, daß nicht nur bei Naturvölkern, sondern überall im Orient die gesamte Bevölkerung einen weit stärkeren Anteil an musikalischen Vorführungen nimmt als im modernen Abendlande. Musik ist für sie nicht schön oder häßlich, sondern auch gut und böse; die Spannung und Befreiung im Ausübenden und im Zuhörenden. . . . [Musik] wird von ihnen als eine Art religiösen Geschehens empfunden, das unbewußt noch in den profansten musikalischen Äußerungen wirkt” (my translation).