

In the summer of 2018, while teaching chamber music at the Curtis Institute of Music to promising young Black and Latinx students at the Sphinx Performance Academy, the Catalyst Quartet decided to embark on a meaningful journey to collect all of the known and discoverable string quartet works by historically important Black composers, in order to record them at the highest level and be a resource for their broader study, performance, and inclusion in the standard classical canon.

As of 2022, we have “Uncovered” incredible and original works for string quartet and quintet with soloist by Samuel Coleridge Taylor, Florence B. Price, William Grant Still, George Walker, Coleridge Taylor-Perkinson, and Le Chevalier de St. George Joseph Bologne.

By 2018 we had encountered quite a few of these works in performance by our faculty colleagues, but that summer the four of us collectively and simultaneously felt a calling to do our part in remedying the obscurity surrounding this repertoire. The painful reality was that the majority of classical music lovers and potential audiences in the USA and across the globe were not getting access to this music, whether in the form of professionally released recordings, clear and cohesive scores from which to perform, or scholarly writings from which to contextualize the composers and their oeuvres. Sitting in the concert hall that summer, the realization kicked in that if our classical music ecosystem hadn't made a significant and collective effort to include these voices by the year 2018, a full 9 years after the hoopla of Florence Price's chamber music being rediscovered, it was going to take a major undertaking to catalyze that change.

In 2019, we invited musical giants Anthony McGill and Stewart Goodyear to record our first Volume with us, purposely dedicated to the pivotal Samuel Coleridge Taylor, the late romantic British icon who would inspire generations with his artistic mastery and soulful Afro-nationalistic style. Volume 1 released Feb 2021, delayed by a raging pandemic and set amongst the backdrop of a wounded nation, attempting to reconcile decades of racial violence and apathy. Even with nearly every major classical music institution setting new vows of solidarity and commitments to diversity and inclusion, there still exist prominent forces in the classical music world that seek to deny important diverse voices from their rightful place in the cannon, and who fear-monger the lie that somehow our collective appreciation of the standard greats— Bach, Beethoven, Mozart— would be diminished by having a truer picture of ALL the voices that contribute to classical music. The *Uncovered Project* celebrates the unyielding voice of Volume 2 composer, performer, and mother, Florence B. Price, for her perseverance in a lifetime where her sex and race would be but a few of the massive obstacles she would overcome in creating an iconic body of works ranging from artsongs and sonatas, to string quartets and symphonies.

Florence B. Price was a brilliant student, graduating high school valedictorian in her native Little Rock, AR at the age of 14. She went on to study composition, organ performance, and piano pedagogy, receiving two diplomas from the New England Conservatory in Boston, before a brief run as the Head of Music at Clarke Atlanta University. After returning to Little Rock in 1912 at the age of 25 to give back to her community, Florence married Thomas Price and had three children. In 1927, under the specific threat of having her youngest daughter be the target of a planned retaliatory hate murder, the Price family was forced to flee. Florence's woes would not stop there. Once her whole family migrated to Chicago by 1928, the stock market crash of 1929 and the following Great Depression devastated her family life and finances. Her husband was in and out of jobs and was physically abusing her, escalating to the point of threatening her life with a gun. Florence was able to serve him a divorce summons in 1930 with the backing of multiple witnesses, and gained full custody of her children by 1931. During these years, Florence's artistic output flourished out of need, and she made money teaching music, accompanying the silent films in Chicago's “Stroll” district, and composing pedagogical piano

pieces for children which were commercially viable enough to be published. During this time she even penned popular songs under the alias "VeeJay." Despite her circumstances, Florence thrived in her early years in Chicago, studying orchestration at the American Conservatory and winning prizes in the Wanamaker Competition that would lead to her Symphony in E minor being discovered and premiered by the Chicago Symphony, a milestone for a woman composer as well as for a composer of color. The resulting fame and opportunity in and around Chicago would be the impetus for a crescendo of artistic output over the next two decades, although Florence would pass away just before leaving on her first tour of Europe, missing out on a right of passage that would grant her contemporaries such as William Grant Still, acceptance in the classical pantheons of Boston, Philadelphia, and New York; and the acceptance that Florence strived for but would elude her in her lifetime.

Despite wanting to be a champion of American new music, Boston Symphony conductor Serge Koussevitzky would deny Florence Price's appeals to have her scores judged only on their merits, over the course of four letters to him from 1941 to 1944. Price's inclusion in the canon is surely long overdue, and still to this day, many judge Price's works with bias or ignorance. The 2021 release of Price's Symphonies No. 1 and 3 by the Philadelphia Orchestra was revelatory and a good faith effort to remedy this past injustice, however many other major orchestras have yet to program Price's symphonic music even once.

Antonin Dvořák, who passed away before ever getting to know Florence Price's music, championed the idea that a noble school of American composition would come from the folk music of Negro Spirituals. Many white American composers took up Dvořák's call and the resulting music, perhaps due to its inauthenticity, didn't carry the gravitas or nobility that Dvořák foresaw. However, the depth and beauty of the works on this disc are a powerful reminder that America's voice, as prophesied by Dvořák, is found in the voices our history has overlooked and suppressed, the voices of the resilient and steadfast.

Volume 2 opens with the powerful and elegiac Piano Quintet in A minor, which fits stylistically in the middle of Price's prominent 1930's era, estimated to be written around 1935. In the surrounding years, Price was especially close to her student and colleague Margaret Bonds, whose mother took in the Price family after losing their home. The Bonds' household was a haven for Black artists and musicians, an environment that inspired Price to produce chamber music of a similar breath to her piano and symphonic works. While Price and Margaret surely would both have traded off performing the prominent and difficult piano parts, on this album the Catalyst Quartet is joined by the virtuoso and Price champion, Michelle Cann. The Quintet in A minor mirrors the epic and classic four movement form Price would employ in her two remaining Symphonies and her large A minor String Quartet No. 2. It is of interest to note her use of the Juba Dance as a form for all of their third movements. In her own words, "In all of my works which have been done in the sonata form with Negroid idiom, I have incorporated a juba as one of the several movements because it seems to me to be no more impossible to conceive of Negroid music devoid of the spiritualistic theme on the one hand than strongly syncopated rhythms of the juba on the other."

In the late 1940's, Florence, at this point in her 60's, penned two separate string quartets entirely based on contrapuntal reimaginings of traditional folk songs. The smaller work titled *Negro Folksongs in Counterpoint* (c. 1947) is receiving its debut recording, possibly because it has been confused with its longer counterpart due to various title changes over the years, and also because Schirmer, who acquired the publishing rights to Price's works in 2018, has yet to release a performance edition. This confusion has done a great disservice to the popularity of this quartet, as it is an incredibly rich and electrifying work that has much to offer, but is scarcely

known. Price's roots as a deeply religious southern Black woman are particularly on show in the *Negro Folksongs*, and she uses the gravity of the songs' spiritual motifs as building blocks for dramatic narratives, where the four voices of the quartet are conversing, interacting, commenting, and at times battling. The use of *Go Down Moses* is of particular affect as the opening movement. The spiritual's origin is attributed to the Underground Railroad, where "conductors" would sing the song as secret code to lead slaves north. Its historical power as well as its allegorical depiction of escaping bondage give the song a vitality few others can match. Price is similarly effective at tapping into the ethos of each of the other spirituals in the work: "Somebody's knockin' at yo do'," "Little David play on yo harp," and "Joshua fit de battle ob Jericho."

Florence Price's String Quartet in A minor (titled No. 2 by Schirmer), is the largest scale work of Price's chamber music that has not been lost. Dated 1935 on the manuscript, the quartet shares very similar formal features and idioms as the Piano Quintet in A minor and the Symphonies 1 and 3. The quartet is densely and virtuosically written with an abundance of double stops, fast arpeggiated flourishes, and brooding contrapuntalism. Each movement is like an entire world unto its own: a highly romantic and searching first movement, a profound spiritual-esque second movement, a boisterous juba third movement, and a blistering finale movement. It is truly a treasure to have such a monumental work for string quartet that captures so richly and dynamically the depth of Price's unique Afro-romantic genius. Although this will be the premiere recording, the Catalyst Quartet looks forward to the day when this work has the plethora of recordings and interpretations that it deserves, just as any other of the great quartets in the cannon has.

The second of Price's folk based quartets, and her last known in the genre, are her Five Folksongs in Counterpoint (1951). Most likely this work existed in a previous form, begun as early as 1927, that included the three spiritual-based movements in the work under a title similar to the *Negro Folksongs*. However, the work was eventually released in its final version dated 1951 and included two more popular folk songs. The five folk songs are treated with all kinds of contrapuntal invention as in the four *Negro Folksongs*, weaving intricate textures and taking the listener on a sonic journey. However, the scale to which the themes are developed and ultimately completely transformed is a testament to the compositional prowess Price was wielding toward the end of her life. It's one of her last major compositions before her passing in 1953, and it's poignant to view the last movement *Swing low Sweet Chariot*, the longest and farthest reaching movement of all her counterpoint studies, in this culminating context.

Most likely the earliest work on the album, Price's charming "unfinished" String Quartet in G Major, attributed to 1929, gives us a taste of a different compositional era that looks forward and backward within the same piece. 1929 was an eventful year in Price's life— abuse and separation at home, the stock market crash, beginning continued music studies— and the two movement quartet symbolizes a catharsis and transformation for her. The first movement is simple and hymn-like, gently waltzing in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time. Unlike the style she would eventually develop, the movement does not display explicitly "Negroid idioms," however Price's gifts for melody and rich harmony are on full display. In this movement, one can see Florence Price, the elegant pedagog, setting off on the journey of a full length string quartet in the image of the greats she studied as a conservatory student. The second movement is an especially gorgeous and ethereal Andante, whose spiritual qualities look forward to her style in the 1930s. The second movement's B section sounds like it could be right out of one of the silent films Florence improvised for, with its spooky and quirky allure. We may never know if Price originally intended the String Quartet in G Major to continue, but in its surviving form, it's quite poetic to listen to its

final chords and imagine Florence Price leaving behind the demure housewife from Little Rock in order to begin a new and exciting stage of her life as the powerful icon she would become.

Rounding off the album, the smaller Quintet for Piano and Strings will be the biggest surprise for Florence Price lovers and newcomers alike. Much mystery surrounds the work as it is never written about in any source and only exists in its manuscript form. Scholarly sources reference the existence and premiere of a major Piano Quintet in E minor by Price in 1936, but these two works surely are not the same, as the short and eclectic work on this album does not fit into Price's epic Afro-romantic style of the 1930s. Each movement is in a different key, and the first movement is virtually without key center in its far-reaching chromaticism and augmented harmonies. The movement flashes through gestures of marching, sweeping, and dashing before recollecting into a signature Price coda. The second movement is another shining example of Price's connection to the spiritual, this time flourished and held up by the piano. The final movement, in triple meter, is a joyful release, full of playful textures and voices that boil up and bring us to the end of the work before you know it. With no dates or references to place it, this premiere recording of the mini Quintet for Piano and Strings, together with the rest of Florence Price's known string quartet repertoire, will hopefully shed some more light on Price's oeuvre and be a resource for her continued study and performance.

-Paul Laraia (violinist, Catalyst Quartet)