



AMERICAN CLASSICS



Florence Beatrice
PRICE

Songs of the Oak

**Concert Overtures
Nos. 1 and 2**

The Oak

**Colonial Dance
Suite of Dances**

**Württembergische
Philharmonie
Reutlingen
John Jeter**

 Deutschlandfunk Kultur

Florence Beatrice Price (1887–1953)

Concert Overtures Nos. 1 and 2 • Songs of the Oak • The Oak • Colonial Dance • Suite of Dances

Florence B. Price was a consummate musician – at once a virtuoso pianist and organist, a prolific composer, and a distinguished pedagogue. Though known primarily as a composer today, each of these disciplines reinforced the others, leading to a stylistically capacious catalog of nearly four hundred works.

Born in Little Rock, Arkansas, and trained at Boston's New England Conservatory, Price dedicated the first 20 years of her professional career to providing musical instruction to African American students at segregated southern academies and in her private piano studio – environments for which she composed a range of pedagogical works. During the mid-1920s, she expanded her portfolio with substantial pieces for solo piano that won national contests designed to support Black composers. Sadly, the elation over these achievements was severely curtailed by pervasive racist violence that drove her family to relocate to Chicago in 1927.

The South Side of Chicago offered Price an invigorating cultural environment shaped by the ongoing Black Renaissance that had erupted there, in Harlem, and elsewhere around the country. It was among the Black writers, dancers, and musicians of Chicago – especially a community of artistic women – that Price refined a distinctive musical language honoring her African American cultural heritage through a variety of stylistic means, from allusions to the spirituals to contemporary reinterpretations of the African-derived Juba dance. Over the course of her career, Price composed in nearly every classical genre other than opera and found an astonishingly diverse array of individuals and organizations willing to champion her music – a list that included contraltos Marian Anderson and Etta Moten, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Woman's Symphony Orchestra of Chicago, the National Association of Negro Musicians, government-sponsored ensembles during the New Deal era, Chicago's flourishing network of women's music clubs, and even athletic bands at southern universities.

Shortly after moving to Chicago, Price turned to orchestral music for the first time as she entered a round of contests for Black composers sponsored by the department store magnate Rodman Wanamaker. Two of her earliest works – a *Symphony in E minor* and a tone poem, *Ethiopia's Shadow in America* – won First Prize and honorable mention, respectively, in 1932. Frederick Stock and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra successfully premiered the symphony in June 1933, launching Price's career in the orchestral arena. Despite this early success, she experienced mixed performance results over the next two decades.

According to current scholarship, five of her fifteen orchestral works received performances during her lifetime, and in nearly all cases, only once. Why she wrote certain works without a guarantee of performance remains a mystery, but it is possible that some were commissioned and performed; to date, no evidence has disclosed these facts. Of the pieces on this release, audiences indisputably heard the *Concert Overture No. 1* and selections from the *Suite of Dances* during her lifetime – the *Overture* at a 1939 performance of Chicago's short-lived American Concert Orchestra under the baton of Ralph Cissne and movements from the *Suite* at a televised Chicago Symphony Orchestra concert directed by associate conductor George Schick. After Price's death in 1953, moreover, the location of the scores for all but two of the pieces on this release (*The Oak* and *Suite of Dances*) remained virtually unknown until they were recovered from Price's former summer home near St. Anne, Illinois in 2009. Here they are recorded together for the first time.

The variety of genres represented on this release – overtures, tone poems, and dances – place Price’s immense artistic imagination on full display. Opening the album, the two overtures show her deep connections to the repertoire of spirituals dating from Black enslavement. She once wrote, “We are waking up to the fact *pregnant with possibilities* that we already have a folk music in the Negro spirituals” (emphasis added). For Price, these “possibilities” were opportunities for intense musical and emotional engagement with these signal cultural touchstones. *Concert Overture No. 1* (1939), a rumination on the spiritual *Sinner, Please Don’t Let This Harvest Pass* (also the inspiration for Price’s *Fantasie Nègre No. 1* for solo piano) unfolds in a series of episodes that state the theme in its totality or present it as fragments with shifting orchestral colors and unsettled harmonies. A beautiful chorale tune and a brass fanfare offer distinct emotional contrasts. The first half of *Concert Overture No. 2* (1943) presents three miniature scenes in rapid succession. Based on three spirituals in turn – *Go Down, Moses*; *Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen*; and *Ev’ry Time I Feel the Spirit* – the musical character of these sections moves from somber to poignant to ebullient. The more abstract second half combines melodic fragments from the three previous sections into a unified portrait that closes with a return to the profundity of Moses’ cry for liberation found in the first spiritual.

Though occasionally confused as the same work, Price’s tone poems *Songs of the Oak* and *The Oak*, both dating from 1943, depart significantly in scope. *Songs of the Oak* is a tour de force of Hollywood-influenced picturesque musical storytelling, replete with imitations of woodland creatures interacting with the mighty oak tree, a righteous protector whose regal “songs” appear throughout in statements given by a full complement of brass. Tolling chimes signaling the inexorability of time close the piece as the stoic oak appears to stand unshaken for eternity. A more compact treatment of a similar image, *The Oak* shares certain sonic elements – powerful brass and fluttering woodwinds, for example – and unfolds in a series of internally anxious, almost Wagnerian, episodes that ultimately end in tragedy.

Price maintained an abiding interest in dance as an integral part of African American life, and American life more generally, once writing, “Rhythm is of preeminent importance. In the dance, it is a compelling, onward-sweeping force that tolerates no interruption.” *Colonial Dance* (n.d.) is a rollicking affair in triple time with a melody marked by the so-called Scotch snap, or emphasis on the second beat of the measure, giving it an angular but propulsive character. A contrasting middle section highlights pizzicato strings accompanied by bells. Arguably Price’s most well-known work, *Suite of Dances* (n.d.) is a full orchestration of her charming *Three Little Negro Dances* for solo piano, a collection written for advancing students with the movement titles *Hoe Cake*, *Rabbit Foot*, and *Ticklin’ Toes*. Published by Theodore Presser in 1933 and distributed in issues of *The Etude Magazine* in subsequent years, the piece was later arranged for concert band by Erik Leidzén and became an instant hit around the country. Here, Price’s ear for orchestral coloration grants each dance a piquancy not found in other versions.

Douglas W. Shadle
Vanderbilt University

Also available



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Württembergische Philharmonie Reutlingen



Since its foundation in 1945, the Württembergische Philharmonie Reutlingen (WPR) has won a considerable reputation, with concert series at home and abroad including a tour of Japan in 2006 as the official representative of Baden-Württemberg. The orchestra has collaborated with distinguished soloists including Edita Gruberová, Thomas Hampson, Jonas Kaufmann, Lang Lang, Sabine Meyer, Gidon Kremer, Frank Peter Zimmermann and Fazıl Say. It has also worked with artists in other spheres such as James Morrison, Till Brönner, Klaus Doldinger, Ute Lemper, Yasmin Levy, Dominique Horwitz and Max Mutzke, and has featured the music of Turkey and the Jewish diaspora in special FOKUS events. Engagements have taken the orchestra to leading concert halls including the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam; Philharmonie Berlin; Herkulessaal, Munich; Festspielhaus Baden-Baden; Musikverein, Vienna and halls in Lucerne, Zurich and Milan. The orchestra is also committed to outreach projects, being awarded the Innovative Orchestra prize in 2019 by the German Orchestra Foundation for its interactive livestream format NETZ-WERK-ORCHESTER, and the inaugural Federal Prize for Cultural Education (BKM Award) in 2009.

www.wuerttembergische-philharmonie.de

John Jeter



Photo: Nicole Jeter

John Jeter has been music director and conductor of the Fort Smith Symphony since 1997. He received the 2012 Governor's Award for "Individual Artist of the State of Arkansas", the 2002 Helen M. Thompson Award presented by the League of American Orchestras, and the Mayor's Achievement Award for services to the City of Fort Smith. Jeter has guest conducted numerous orchestras in the US, including the Springfield Symphony, Indianapolis Symphony, Oklahoma City Philharmonic, Arkansas Symphony and Illinois Chamber Symphony. His orchestral education programmes have reached up to 10,000 students annually, and he is involved alongside Fort Smith Symphony with music and health research and education in conjunction with the Arkansas College of Health Education Health Research Institute Health & Wellness Center in Fort Smith. Aside from conducting and teaching, Jeter has co-hosted numerous radio programmes and is involved in several radio and television projects concerning classical music. He received his formal education at the University of Hartford's Hartt School of Music and Butler University's Jordan College of Fine Arts.

Florence Beatrice
PRICE
(1887–1953)

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|---|---|-------|
| 1 | Concert Overture No. 1 (1939)
(based on the spiritual <i>Sinner,</i>
<i>Please Don't Let This Harvest Pass</i>) | 11:40 |
| 2 | Concert Overture No. 2 (1943)
(based on the spirituals <i>Go Down, Moses,</i>
<i>Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen</i> and
<i>Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit</i>) (Ending A)* | 13:34 |
| 3 | Songs of the Oak (1943)* | 16:22 |
| 4 | The Oak (1943)
Andante – Allegro – Allegretto – Allegro (Ending B) | 10:42 |
| 5 | Colonial Dance (date unknown)* | 4:14 |
| | Suite of Dances (date unknown)* | 3:55 |
| 6 | I. Allegretto | 1:37 |
| 7 | II. Allegretto | 0:55 |
| 8 | III. Allegro molto | 1:20 |

*WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING

Württembergische Philharmonie
Reutlingen
John Jeter

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AMERICAN CLASSICS

The rediscovery of Florence Price's music has revealed one of the most significant bodies of work by an African American composer in the 20th century. The variety of genres represented on this release place Price's immense artistic imagination on full display. The two *Concert Overtures* explore her engagement with spirituals, both episodically and coloristically, in music that embraces the somber, the poignant and the ebullient. *Songs of the Oak* is a tour de force of Hollywood-influenced storytelling while *The Oak* offers a more anxious, ultimately tragic portrait. Price's best-known work is the *Suite of Dances* – originally for piano it is heard here in the composer's full, sumptuous orchestration.

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www.naxos.com

