The Uncaged Bird: The Life and Struggles of Florence Price

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Abstract

Florence Price overcame many obstacles in order to pursue her musical career in the United States. She constantly faced oppression and discouragement from society on account of her race and gender. The present paper first introduces the Gilded Age, a period of rapid economic growth Price lived in, and how the situation in Arkansas affected her family and early life. It dives deep into the social, economic, and political parts of Arkansas to provide valuable insights into the reforms and changes that occurred during Price's life. Then, this paper endeavours a more in-depth explanation about the personal life of Price, especially about her family background. Her parents' job and status played a crucial role in her exposure to music from an early age. At first, her community faced no racism and plenty of opportunities for her to prosper in music. However, after the Reconstruction Era, Arkansas faced extreme racism causing her family to become financially unstable. During these times, Price was not able to express her music to the fuller degree. Nonetheless, her determination led to her admission to one the most prestigious music schools. Through numerous teaching and performing experiences, she finally made an impact in the music world and gained recognition after performing with the Chicago symphony. This was a significant accomplishment especially for an African American women composer. Florence Price has inspired many composers to overcome obstacles and pursue their career and dreams.

Keywords: Florence Price, Gilded Age, music, racism, gender discrimination....

The Gilded Age, Between Economic Development and Segregation

From 1875 to 1900, Arkansas experienced exceptional economic growth due to the development of industry and technology that led to the mass production and distribution of

goods, such as iron, steel, and lumber, throughout the country. This economic development created a mass market where commerce and trade became prevalent and enabled Arkansas to be a city of great prosperity. Despite their race, everyone had an equal

opportunity to thrive during this time. Many black people in Arkansas got very wealthy. So, it is known as the "negro paradise." Moreover, the "Gilded Age" was a time when everyone, regardless of race or social class, was given opportunities to earn wealth and start a new life.2

These improvements and opportunities encouraged people from the countryside to come to the city, which meant that cultural and social changes were inevitable. People all around the country came to the city seeking a better life. However, the sudden industrial changes made people who still lived in the countryside extremely difficult to adjust to, and were mired in poverty.

One factor that contributed to the reforms of Arkansas is the rapid expansion of railroads and the increase in routes for transportation. After the civil war, the republican government had pro-railroad policies that hugely impacted the construction of railroads. The railroads connected the capital city to Memphis all the way to Little rock. The St Louis railway and Kansas city southern tied Arkansas's major towns and agricultural regions, making it highly convenient to travel. Furthermore, the railroads also connected the national market, making it easier for people to trade and exchange goods. As a result, transportation costs dropped, letting money be used on other industrial developments.3

Previously a only-white government, as black people started getting important roles, they formed a stronger and multi-ethnic government and started appointing black people as higher authorities with important positions. Black people started getting an equal voice as white people and were even allowed to vote. The black population in Arkansas surged and many people from the countryside came to Arkansas looking for more opportunities. However, as black people gave constant effort for political success and economic freedom, the still greater majority (the white population) did not like this and felt with this situation in hostility. 5

According to Black Politics in Arkansas during the Gilded Age, "efforts precipitated white opposition" and used terms like "white boss" 6. This is when the Gilded Age came to a downfall. Black people started to get segregated again and faced harsh racism than ever before. This process was mainly represented by a set of racist laws called the Jim Crow laws.7 During the Ferguson case in 1896,8 the Supreme court ruled that the Jim Crow law9 "separate, but equal" was unconstitutional and violated the 13, 14, and 15 amendment, and went against Black people's freedom and rights. Jim Crow laws were statutes on both local and state levels that legalised open racial segregation. This included being able to openly kick black people out of restaurants, transportation, public areas, etc. Due to the extreme segregation that black community faced, it was hard for musicians like Florence Price to thrive in such situations.

Florence Price

Florence Price,10 a highly respected black woman composer, was born in 1887. Price's

family was pretty well off as her father became the first black dentist in Chicago, seeking great opportunities in Little Rock after moving there as well. Her father was respected by many as he treated patients with utmost care and no discrimination, and soon became one the leaders of Little Rock. Florence Price's mother also had a flourishing career, and was active in many businesses, mostly investments and real estate. Overall, Florence was exposed to great education and opportunities from a young age. Moreover, she was a gifted musician who was often known to be a musical and intellectual prodigy.

During the Reconstruction era, many affluent African American families moved to southern cities for opportunities, especially to Little Rock. Florence Price's was used to host places for African American musicians and artists to stay in Arkansas when they had nowhere else to stay. This provided her the opportunity to be taught by many talented artists, and started her musician training earlier than others. Only at the age of three, her music education started with private lessons with her mother and exposure to many classical music especially in the Allison Presbyterian Church in Little Rock.11 She often heard works from Johann Sebastian Bach, Felix Mendelssohn, and many others, which inspired her from a very young age. Furthermore, her music was supported by Charlotte Andrews Stephens 12, who, similar to Price, worked through the obstacles of segregation. She was born into slavery but regardless achieved her music career and taught

almost for 70 years before retiring. This was a great motivation for Price.

However, soon after the reconstruction era, the rights of the black community deteriorated. Her father lost all his white patients, and her mother was not as successful in her businesses anymore. The Price family lost all their privileges and was forced to move back to chicago. She could not learn music like she did before; she had to stop her private lessons, talented musical artists were not visiting her anymore, and she could not attend public concerts. Her musical talent and family was suppressed by the segregation and surrounding growing racism. As a result, she was unable to express her music and be educated to the fullest degree.13

Florence Price did not give up and ended up graduating high school as a valedictorian at the age of only 14 and attended the New England Conservatory school, following in her mother's footsteps. During the concert of June 14, 1906, Price had an organ performance in which she was able to prove herself to be one of the few students who could work with George Whitefiled Chadwick. Under Chadwick, she learned and researched heavily on black folk tales and black music despite the racism, she still strived to explore her own culture and compose music based on her own background. She learned a lot from Chadwick and participated in composing, teaching many experiences, concerts,etc; she was emerging to become the next generation of African American composers, except the fact that she was a woman. She earned a music degree and continued studying with Frederick Converse until her return to Arkansas. Frederick Converse was a composer of classical music who had many students, among which was Florence Price.14

Before returning to Arkansas, she taught for one year at the Cotton Plant Arkadelphia Academy and taught at Shorter College from 1906-1910, finally teaching at Clark university from 1910 to 1912. Taking a break from her career, she taught privately and started to focus on her hobby in composition and making her own music.

In 1912, she married Thomas B. Price, a wealthy lawyer in Little Rock. She lived a conventional life as a teacher and as housewife for her children. However, in 1927, she encountered racial segregation and problems once again. Due to her concerns toward that growing issue, the family had to move to Chicago.15 Her husband lost many clients, and his once successful economic situation started to deteriorate quickly. This turn of events caused her financial problems, and forced the Price family to move again. Her family was not the same anymore, as Thomas price struggled to get a job and support the family, he got abusive and often harassed Florence and her children.

Florence Price decided to divorce him and raise her children as a single mom, which prevented her from developing her musical career even more. Despite this hardship, she composed the Fantasie Negre, her first piano composition that combined Negro melodic and rhythmic idioms with European technique and fantasia style. Through her music, Florence Price succeeded in incorporating her academic knowledge while

making an effort to preserve her cultural heritage.16

Price's Struggles, and Return to the Musical World

Regardless of the judgement and hardships Florence would face, she did not hesitate and confidently filed for divorce. However, the resulting precarious financial situation greatly impacted her family and her musical career. Due to her position as a single mother, it was difficult for her to support the family. Price, therefore had to halt her interests in composing music and go back to private lessons, which was not as easy as before since people preferred more experienced white teachers. However, one of her prime students, Margaret Allison stayed with Price through her hard situation and even let her stay in her house until 1935.17

While living with her, her social circle expanded to other black musicians like Will Marion Cook, Abbie Mitchell, and Langston Hughes. Together they sought to pursue their musical careers and gain recognition by the public who would still turn a blind eye due to their skin colour. Having no choice left, Price used pseudonyms, for example Vee Jay, and composed rather popular songs; she also played the organ and piano for silent films.

Although Price was accepted by her skills and musical talent, she was always forced to do it backstage or anonymously. Still, she was able to earn enough money to live decently.18

Soon, she would reach the peak of her career. After competing in many competitions to gain more recognition, she was awarded with four Wanamaker prizes including the top prize for symphonic composition. Her Symphony in E minor was a groundbreaking piece that surpassed all the racial bias against her. Frederick Stock, the conductor of the Chicago symphony conducted Price's Symphony in E minor for the Chicago World Fair. 19 This was a great achievement, as she was the first African American woman to be presented by such a prestigious orchestra. Consisting of white men only, an African American women's music being premiered is a monumental achievement to this day. This news shocked the public, as it was almost impossible for this to happen. Critics raved unanimously and people from all around the country came to watch. "Symphony in E minor is a thrilling four-movement work packed with soaring melodies, inventive writing (a second movement almost entirely for the brass section!) and gorgeous harmonies."20 Later she made greater successes like her concerto in one movement, which was premiered in Chicago in 1934 by the Woman's Symphony of Chicago. Sonata in E minor21 was also a large-scale expansive work which was played in CD's and even won first place Wanamaker prize in its category.22

Florence Price's impact

Florence Price's outstanding career and experience encouraged many individual composers. Nicole Jordan, an African American

woman working in the musical field, and member of the Philadelphia orchestra, was inspired by Florence Price and decided to continue her "amazing legacy".23

Florence Price was the first black female composer to have her symphony performed by a major American orchestra.24 Being both black and a woman, she nonetheless overcame segregation and gender discrimination. Thus, she was unable to find employment after being refused by the Arkansas music teachers association which only granted admission to white people. Arkansas, which comfortable city for black residents, also became racially difficult and discriminatory. Due to such numerous incidents, she had to move many times and put her musical career on hold.

Florence is credited to be the first black women to be recognized with her outstanding skills as a symphonic composer. Although her music was still performed by African American composers and musicians, many of her work has been overlooked25. Not many people in the classical world recognized her work as much as it should. However, in 2009, over five decades since she passed away, her music was found in the attic of a dilapidated house. Since then, much of her work has been rediscovered and composer G Schirmer played a huge role in getting her music recognized.26

Appendix

 Florence Price, Letter from Florence Price to Serge Koussevitzky, July 5, 1943.
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- 12. https://www.pricefest.org/blog/2018/1/1 7/florence-price-and-the-politics-of-her-existence. 12 "Florence Price Biography." Afrocentric Voices in "Classical" Music, December 5, 2022. http://afrovoices.com/florence-price-biography/.
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 marriage
- 16. The Heart of a Woman', the Composition by Florence Price: Dr. John Michael Cooper." Florence Price, April 4, 2021. https://florenceprice.com/the-heart-of-awoman-the-composition-by-florence-price-the-article-written-by-dr-joh n-michael-cooper/; Appendix D.
- 17. Arionne, Nettles, "Florence Price Was One of the Greatest Composers You Might Not Know Of." WBEZ Chicago. WBEZ Chicago, August31,

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 The Legacy of Florence Price. Accessed December 3, 2022.

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- 26. Visions, Office. "Florence Price and the Truth About Black Excellence." Visions Inc., February 23, 2022. https://visions-nic.org/florence-price-and-the-truth-about-black-excellence/; "Florence Price." Explore Classical Music. Accessed January 23, 2023. https://www.exploreclassicalmusic.com/florenceprice.

Appendix

Appendix A



Distribution of the Colored population of the United States: 1890

United States Census Office. 11Th Census, 1890, and Henry Gannett. Statistical atlas of the United States, based upon the results of the eleventh census. Washington, Govt. print. off,

1898.

https://www.loc.gov/item/07019233/.

Appendix B

Drawing depicting Jim Crow

"Jim Crow." The Library of Congress. Accessed
February 1, 2023.

Map.

https://www.loc.gov/item/2004669584/.

Appendix C



Picture of Florence Price

Nicole, Glaza . "Nicole Glaza." Charlotte Symphony. Charlotte Symphony Charlotte Symphony, August 5, 2020.

https://www.charlottesymphony.org/blog/trailblazer-composer-florence-price/.

Appendix D



Music piece handwritten by Florence Price

Maddy Shaw, Roberts. "Lost Manuscripts by Composer Florence Price Unearthed and



Published." Classic FM. Classic FM, March 3, 2020.

https://www.classicfm.com/musicnews/florence-price-composer-manuscriptsdiscovered/.

This is a primary source of Price's music that was once lost but rediscovered in 2009. This is the piece that Price wrote herself.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

"Florence Price Collection," University Libraries Digital Collections. Accessed January 23, 2023. https://digitalcollections.uark.edu/digital/collection/p17212coll3.

This library is a primary source that shows different photos and documents of Florence Price. It shows Price present at different musical events and even actual scores of her music. This is significant because it provides important evidence in my appendix.

Florence Price. Letter from Florence Price to Serge Koussevitzky, July 5, 1943. Accessed on February 1, 2023. https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/pieces/6500/symphony-no-3-in-c-minor.

This is a letter from Florence Price who attempts to convince Serge Koussevitzky to include her compositions in his program. It includes a meaningful quote where Florence Price talks about her awareness of the two obstacles she needs to face in order to become a composer. It sets up an important introduction as it shows the frontiers that I am going to talk about in my essay.

"Jim Crow and Segregation: Classroom Materials at the Library of Congress: Library of Congress." The Library of Congress. Accessed September 24, 2023. https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/jimcrow-segregation/.

This is a library that shows different primary sources of the segregation that black people faced and documents of the Jim Crow laws. It shows pictures of the discriminatory Jim Crow laws Price had to fight against, serving as evidence for Price's obstacles.

"Jim Crow." The Library of Congress. Accessed February 1, 2023. https://www.loc.gov/item/2004669584/.

This is a primary source of the character Jim Crow that was used as a symbol of racism and the segregation laws.

Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896)," Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School, https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/tex t/163/537 (accessed December 19, 2022).

This is a primary source that talks about the case between Plessy and Ferguson, where the doctrine "separate but equal" came to be. This was part of the Jim Crow laws and is good evidence to show the segregation and neglect Price must have endured.

Maddy Shaw, Roberts. "Lost Manuscripts by Composer Florence Price Unearthed and Published." Classic FM. Classic FM, March 3, 2020.

https://www.classicfm.com/musicnews/florence-price-composer-manuscriptsdiscovered/.

This is a primary source of Price's music that was once lost but rediscovered in 2009. This is the piece that Price wrote herself.

Nicole, Glaza . "Nicole Glaza." Charlotte Symphony. Charlotte Symphony Charlotte Symphony, August 5, 2020.

https://www.charlottesymphony.org/blog/trailblazer-composer-florence-price/.

This is a primary source of a picture taken of Florence Price.

The Philadelphia Collection. "Florence Price: Symphonies Nos. 1 & 3." February 2, 2023, Youtube.

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=OLAK5 uy_nVvX2BMP6_ncZ6fOQLg5SQEi-6kRX2 _Mo

This youtube video link shows a series of Price's pieces played. This is important to include as it is her major achievement.

United States Census Office. 11Th Census, 1890, and Henry Gannett. Statistical atlas of the United States, based upon the results of the eleventh census. Washington, Govt. print. off, 1898.

https://www.loc.gov/item/07019233/.

This primary source of a map that shows the Black population in Arkansas is important to see how crowded and popular this area was for the Black community during the Gilded Age.

Secondary Sources

"Biography." Florence Price, November 30, 2022. https://florenceprice.com/biography/.

This is a primary source that includes a gallery of primary source pictures of Florence Price but also has a biography of her. The biography is divided into many sections that each specify a part of her life. It is clear to understand the process she took and what she overcame/sacrificed to achieve her success.

Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Gilded Age." Encyclopedia Britannica, 30, December 2022. https://www.britannica.com/event/Gilded-Age. This article from Britannica provides a general introduction of the Gilded Age period. It is useful to grasp an overall picture of that particular time of great development, albeit undermined with poverty and growing inequalities.

Davis, Lizzie. "The Inspirational Life of Composer Florence Price – and Why Her Story Still Matters Today." Classic FM, February 2, 2022.

https://www.classicfm.com/discovermusic/florence-price/.

This website talks about the inspirational life of Florence Price and explains what her music sounded like. This is important in understanding how her music was so special and unique to be that successful.

Ege, Samantha. "Florence Price and the Politics of Her Existence." International Florence Price Festival. International Florence Price Festival, March 28, 2019. https://www.pricefest.org/blog/2018/1/17/florence-price-and-the-politics-of-her-existence.

This website shows a chronological order of Price's life, it is really important in understanding the time periods she was educated and was working on her career. We can learn information from her childhood all the way to her secondary education and her career.

Encyclopaedia of Arkansas. "Post-Reconstruction through the Gilded Age, 1875 through 1900."

https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/post-reconstruction-through-the-gilded-age-1875-through-1900-402

This encyclopaedia explains the early twentieth century Arkansa and the developments it went through during the Gilded Age. It talks about job opportunities, transportation, technological developments. This was really important in understanding Price's background and in what type of environment she was living in.

Encyclopaedia of Arkansas. "Early Twentieth Century (1901-1940)." Transportation and Markets

https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/early-twentieth-century-1901-through-1940-403/.

This part of the encyclopaedia talks about the railroad development and how it caused many people from rural areas to come to Arkansas looking for job opportunities.

Florence Price's family was an important part in helping African American families and Price's musical career was greatly influenced by this time. This period was a time that Price's family amassed great wealth, and therefore Price was able to live a privileged and educated life.

"Florence Beatrice Price, African American composer, Arranger & Teacher." Accessed February 2, 2023. https://chevalierdesaintgeorges.homestead.com/Price.html#14.

This website is extremely important because it also explains Price's life in different perspectives and aspects. One thing great about this website is that it dives deeply into Florence's personal life such as her marriage and divorce and how that also became an obstacle as a single mother. It has a clear transition in her career when it talks about how she got inspired to participate in a competition, etc.

Florence Price." Explore Classical Music. Accessed January 23, 2023. https://www.exploreclassicalmusic.com/florenceprice.

This website is an interview of Douglas Shadle who is a musicologist that did a lot of research on Florence Price. His interview is important in understanding how Price's music was so successful, what kind of music she made and

what her music represents. One important part about this interview is that Shadle talks about the rediscovery of Price's music, which he took part in.

"Florence Price Biography." Afrocentric Voices in "Classical" Music, December 5, 2022. http://afrovoices.com/florence-price-biography/.

This website talks about the different people in her life that influenced her and played a big role in her career. It mentions her teachers and mentors alongside other African American composers that took part in her journey.

"Freedom Riders and Jim Crow Laws." American Experience, PBS,

https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/freedom-riders-jim-crow-laws/(accessed January 7, 2023).

This website talks about the "separate but equal" treatment under the Jim Crow laws and how it held to serious cases that show clear racism and segregation Price might have faced in her daily life.

"Jim Crow Laws: Definition, Facts & Timeline - History." Jim Crow Laws, February 28, 2018. https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/jim-crow-laws.

This website talks about the jim crow laws and the harsh segregation African American people faced. This is important to understand because this is one of the biggest frontiers that Price had to overcome in order to pursue her career.

Moneyhon, Carl H. "Black Politics in Arkansas during the Gilded Age, 1876-1900." The

Arkansas Historical Quarterly 44, no. 3 (1985): 222-45. https://doi.org/10.2307/40025863.

This research paper explains about the uprising of black communities and how they started getting more power socially and politically. It talks about the peak point of the Gilded Age and how this time period benefited Florence in becoming a musical composer.

"My Journey to Discovering Florence Price." The Legacy of Florence Price. Accessed December 3, 2022.

https://www.kimmelculturalcampus.org/blog/nicole-jordan-florence-price/#:~:text=For%20th ose%20of%20you%20who,(the%20%20Chica go%20%20Symphony%20%20Orchestra).

This website talks about Nicole Jordan, who is also a Black woman who overcame many stereotypes in order to become the first black woman to be able to be recruited in the Philadelphia Orchestra. She explains how she was extremely inspired by Florence Price. This is important to include in my essay because it describes Price's short term influence on an individual.

Nettles, Arionne. "Florence Price Was One of the Greatest Composers You Might Not Know Of." WBEZ Chicago. WBEZ Chicago, August 31, 2022.

https://www.wbez.org/stories/who-was-florence-price/a07ae174-7c33-43ef-a877-ae68ed82fb 47.

This website is extremely important as it clearly shows what affects Price's music and career in recent days. It talks about how her music was refounded and it was initially overlooked, and did not receive the recognition it deserved. This was an important aspect in learning that her frontiers and obstacles still prevent her from getting fully acknowledged to this day.

Office, Visions. "Florence Price and the Truth About Black Excellence." Visions Inc., February 23, 2022.

https://visions-inc.org/florence-price-and-thetruth-about-black-excellence/.

This website is mostly about the appraisal of Florence Price on the great achievements she had. One thing unique about this website is that it talks about specific music pieces and explains the different meanings that they represent.

Ross, Alex. "The Rediscovery of Florence Price." The New Yorker, January 29, 2018. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/02/05/the-rediscovery-of-florence-price.

This website talks about how Price's music was rediscovered in 2009, and finally got the recognition it deserves. It explains how unfortunately, Price's works were heavily overlooked and despite her success even in recent years. This shows that even to this day, Price's frontiers prevent her from getting fully accepted.

The Caged Bird: The Life and Music of Florence B. Price. Directed by James Greeson. The University of Arkansas Press, 2015. Accessed on November 15, 2022.

This documentary focuses on Price's early life and what factors influenced her learning. It dives deep into her life and explains some obstacles she might have faced throughout her life. It also includes parts of her actual music which acts as important evidence of the achievements she made.

"The Heart of a Woman', the Composition by Florence Price: The Article Written by Dr. John Michael Cooper." Florence Price, April 4, 2021. https://florenceprice.com/the-heart-of-a-woman-the-composition-by-florence-price-the-article

-written-by-dr-john-michael-cooper/.

This bibliography of Florence Price shows different aspects of her life in a very organised manner. The website is divided into different sections like "young beginning" or "before the birth of Florence B Price", etc. It in-deptly explains each part which was helpful in understanding her overall life in my essay

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