

Proceedings of GREAT Day

Volume 2021

Article 10

2022

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Recommended Citation

North, Allison (2022) "Samantha Ege: Revealing the Legacy of Black Classical Composers through the Work of Florence Price)," *Proceedings of GREAT Day*: Vol. 2021, Article 10.

Available at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day/vol2021/iss1/10>

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Samantha Ege is a musicologist-pianist and a leading interpreter of the African-American composer Florence B. Price. She is currently the Lord Crewe Junior Research Fellow in Music at Lincoln College. There, she also teaches courses in music and specializes in the influence of African American and female composers of the 19th and 20th centuries. Her research focuses on uncovering the history of African American women in classical music, whose works have been historically repressed. She has written multiple publications on Florence Price as well as released two albums featuring her compositions. Dr. Ege's work to amplify Florence Price through her publications and performances is significant because it provides representation of a Black female composer in classical music, which restores Price's place in history as well as provides inspiration to other musicians of color.

Dr. Samantha Ege is a musicologist-pianist and a leading interpreter of the African American composer Florence B. Price. She has written multiple publications on Florence Price as well as released two albums featuring her compositions. Ege's musical education growing up taught her that only White men belonged in the world of classical music. It was impossible for Ege to imagine Black women as classical musicians, but learning about Florence Price allowed Ege to see herself as part of classical music history. Specifically, it was Price's *Fantasie Negre* that helped Ege realize this. In a blog post from 2019, she writes:

Fantasie Negre carried the message that there was nothing incompatible, and more importantly, nothing new about being black, classically-trained and a woman. Because of Price...I no longer had to dream up the impossible. I could see a very real classical music history before me that placed black women at the centre. And I could see myself. (Ege, 2019a)

Ege further explains that *Fantasia Negre* allowed her to realize what she was able to achieve: “It allowed me to see my potential in a powerful and uninhibited light. It gave me permission to wholeheartedly and unapologetically pursue whatever I decided that potential was” (Ege, 2019a).

Price was not the first Black classical composer; there were other women whose own achievements contributed to Price’s success. Some of these women include Nora Douglas Holt, Estella Conway Bonds, and Maude Roberts George. Nora Douglas Holt was a music critic for the *Chicago Defender*, a Black newspaper. She also co-founded the Nation Association of Negro Musicians in 1919. Price was later a member of this organization, which would provide her a network of support both as a Black woman as well as a composer (Ege, 2020b, p. 16). Estella Conway Bonds hosted frequent gatherings in her home for various artists. This helped connect the Black musical community in Chicago. Price was friends with Bonds, and Price lived with Bonds for a period when she was having financial trouble. It was while living with Bonds that Price wrote her submissions for the Wanamaker Music Contest, along with the help of the tight-knit community Bonds had created. Maude Roberts George took over as the music critic for the *Chicago Defender* newspaper after Bonds in 1917. Her columns “provided one of the most consistent and thorough public documentations of Price’s musical activity during this time” (Ege, 2020b, p. 13). George, who also became the president of the Chicago Music Association, used her influence to further Price’s career. As president of the CMA, George helped raise funds for the 1933 concert where Price’s Symphony in E minor premiered, performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Overall, Price would not have been able to accomplish the things she did without the work of those three women. According to Ege:

Price was not an anomaly in the American musical landscape; behind the history that she made in 1933 lies an essential narrative that requires excavation—one that reveals how black women’s collective agency, advocacy, and activism paved the way for Price’s success. (Ege, 2020b, p. 7)

Learning about how these women paved the way for Florence Price inspired Ege to bring awareness to Price’s legacy so that modern composers of color can see that they are not alone and that their work has a place in the mainstream classical repertoire.

Price reflects her identity in her music by using Black folk idioms from spirituals, which are a type of folk song originally sung by slaves in colonial America. In Ege’s (2020a) thesis, she notes how “Price reconciled black folkloric traditions with classical conventions and vitalized her vision for a national musical idiom” (p. 78). In other words, Price combined these folk idioms with the traditions of classical music to create a new musical style. For example, the melody of Price’s *Fantasia Negre* No. 1 in E Minor is from the spiritual “Sinner, Please Don’t Let This Harvest Pass.”

Ege’s research on Florence Price has influenced the way she has interpreted Price’s music. For example, in a podcast interview, Ege explains how the way she performs Price’s *Sonata in E Minor* has changed:

[In] the first movement of the sonata, there's the second theme where the musical idea is repeated three times... When I was able to... identify the three repetitions as something that you might hear in a slave song where three lines are repeated exactly then the fourth line is different, it completely changed the way I understood that section of the music.

In performing Price's music, Ege (2018) aims to spread Price's music so that other musicians of color will see how Price embraced her heritage by integrating it into her music and will be inspired to do the same (p. 2). In an article for a music review website, Ege (2021) writes:

Fantasia Nègre is my realization of a history that I have longed for, and to which I now belong. For me, it has been quite a journey with Price's music giving inspiration and courage along the way. My hope now is that this glorious repertoire may do the same for you. (Broad, 2019, 19:25)

It is commonly said that Florence Price's music was recently rediscovered. However, this narrative is detrimental because, according to Ege, it takes away accountability and responsibility of fixing the obstacles that prevented the mainstream from wanting to access Price's music (Broad, 2019). Price's music has always existed in the Black communities, and these communities have constantly worked to keep her music alive. The rediscovery narrative erases this work. In her thesis, Ege (2020a) quotes another scholar, A. Kori Hill:

The "rediscovered" Black composer is a tired, damaging trope. It reflects an active process, where certain histories and cultural memories are not considered "relevant" to the mainstream until they prove useful. Black musicians kept the name of Florence Price on their lips, in their minds, and under their fingers. She was not forgotten. (p. 149)

Therefore, Ege's work is a restoration of Price's accomplishments instead of a rediscovery. She aims to bring Price's music back to mainstream audiences.

Ege's main goal in performing the works of Florence Price is to restore Price's place in history so that other musicians of color can draw inspiration from Price. Without other precedence in history, there's the sense that you have to create a new territory in order to achieve something. Each generation can benefit by standing on the shoulders of those that preceded them, just as Price used the accomplishments of Holt, Bonds, and George to succeed. Ege's performance of Price's work ensures that Price's voice is heard and her accomplishments are seen by other musicians of color so that they too can realize their full potential.

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