

TAMPA BAY TIMES MASTERWORKS

Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto

Apr 10 & 11, 2021

FLORENCE B. PRICE (1887-1953) DANCES IN THE CANEBRAKES

With recent performances of works by Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, Jessie Montgomery and Ahmed Alabaca, TFO continues to turn attention to a wider range of composers, and this week it shines the spotlight on Florence Beatrice Price, a part of our nation's diverse cultural voice.

Don't feel bad if her name draws a blank. She's curiously absent from Daniel Kingman's book *American Music: A Panorama*, gets but a half page in the 27-volume *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, and even the best of her more than 300 works rarely appear in concert halls.

"Florence Price is one of America's great composers whose work deserves more attention," said TFO General Manager Edward Parsons.

In 2009, a half-century after her death, a bundle of documents was discovered in an abandoned house in St. Anne, Illinois, including original manuscripts of a symphony and two violin concertos composed by Price. Her resurgence continued in 2018 when Alex Ross, music critic for the *New Yorker*, published an essay, *The Rediscovery of Florence Price*.

Price honed her talent as an organist for silent films and a jingle writer for early radio. She studied at the New England Conservatory of Music and served as head of the music department at Clark Atlanta University. She became the first Black woman to be nationally recognized for her symphonic work, and by the 1930s she was compared to her contemporary, the composer William Grant Still.

In 1932, after moving to Chicago to escape the racism of her native Arkansas, she won first prize in the Wanamaker competition for her *Symphony in E Minor*, which would become the first orchestral work by a Black woman performed by a major orchestra. Her forte, however, was the spiritual, and in 1939 the singer Marian Anderson performed her touching *Songs to the Dark Virgin*, set to text by Langston Hughes. Price's reputation soared.

Shortly before her death in 1953, Price wrote the lighthearted *Dances in the Canebrakes* for solo piano, which William Grant Still later revised into a brief orchestral suite. Drawn from Black folk songs and dances of the 1920s and '30s, it opens with *Nimble Feet*, a cheerful rag that echoes the style of Scott Joplin. The second section, *Tropical Noon*, evolves as a sleepy, nostalgic dance, and *Silk Hat and Walking Cane* captures the energy of what might be a crowded Harlem ballroom.

"Canebrakes pairs nicely with the Rachmaninoff, as they are both works written for piano then orchestrated posthumously," Parsons said of two of the works on this weekend's program. "They both also look to the past as the foundations for their work."

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF (1873-1943)
VARIATIONS ON A THEME OF CORELLI, OP. 42

Rachmaninoff lived most of his life in the 20th century, but his music reflects a previous era, more aromatic of Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov than his contemporaries, Bartok and Stravinsky. He wrote music that stuck to the ribs of the conservative public, and he would take pride in knowing his *Second Piano Concerto* remains the single-most played concerto in the repertoire. Today, the *Second Symphony*, *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, *Third Piano Concerto* and *Symphonic Dances* are part of every concert hall's brick and mortar.

Written in 1931 for solo piano, the *Variations on a Theme of Corelli* is based on an old Iberian dance tune known as *La Folia* – which means “madness.” The baroque master Arcangelo Corelli wove it into one of his violin sonatas, just as numerous composers spun their own variants over three centuries. TFO patrons may remember the 2018 program *An Evening at Bach's Coffeehouse*, which featured Vivaldi's version of the tune.

After introducing the mournful main theme, the orchestra begins a journey of 20 short variations – two sets divided by an intermezzo. Much of the music is subtle, not as extroverted as the *Paganini Variations*, and focuses on pathos and finely woven harmonic progressions. The first set includes *La Folia* in various guises, then pauses for the interlude. From there, the variations become dark and turbulent, and listeners might expect a typical Rachmaninoff climax. But no – rather than bringing down the house, he ends the work with a somber quote of the original theme before the orchestra slips into silence.

TFO will perform the entire set of variations, something Rachmaninoff himself seldom did when featuring the work on his piano recitals. He often skipped over sections depending on disruptions by the audience

“I was guided by the coughing of the audience,” he once wrote after a particularly annoying concert experience. “Whenever the coughing increased, I would skip the next variation. Whenever there was no coughing, I would play them in their proper order.”

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)
VIOLIN CONCERTO IN E MINOR

At the tender age of 17, when most of us struggled through our last year of high school, Mendelssohn put the finishing touches on his overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a marvel of music that placed him in the pantheon of the most gifted composers of any era. Educated, cultured, skilled in the visual and literary arts, Mendelssohn early on was prepared for greatness, and included in his circle of friends such giants as Goethe and Schumann.

The cellist Pablo Casals described Mendelssohn as “a romantic who felt at ease within the mold of classicism,” as he wrote in his comfort zone, a loyalist rather than a futurist. He believed in preserving the essential works of the past, especially Bach, and it was Mendelssohn who conducted the monumental but forgotten *St. Matthew Passion*, leading to a Bach revival that has never waned.

His best-loved work, arguably, is the *Violin Concerto* of 1844, which belongs among the big fiddle opuses of Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky and Bruch. Rich in melody, as well as the coherence of its three

uninterrupted movements, the work has endured as a model of fluency between theme and accompaniment. It doesn't hurt to be loaded with good tunes.

"Its abundant melodies sound totally spontaneous and instantly memorable," notes Conrad Wilson in his book, *Notes on Mendelssohn*. "Their problem today is that their sheer familiarity, in all but the best performances, can make them sound tarnished and open to superficiality. But superficial they are not."

This is the first major violin concerto in which the soloist enters before the orchestra has a chance to develop the initial themes. Most intriguing is its mood: a mix of pathos, melancholy and exuberance. The violin writing is virtuosic throughout – note how the instrument jumps right in at the onset and offers a surprising cadenza early on. Mendelssohn added a number of unique touches, such as linking the first and second movements with the sound of a lone bassoon. The tranquil *andante* demands a refined balance of restraint and expression from any soloist.

In a bit of genius, Mendelssohn inserted a brief interlude before the finale, setting up a puckish *allegretto* stuffed with sparkle and bravado, the violin spinning up and down the scale as the orchestra scurries to keep up. Although the entire work sounds seamless and even simple to the ear, it's anything but, said TFO Concertmaster Jeffrey Multer, this weekend's soloist.

"When you dig into it and realize what he was doing with harmony and form, it's like wow," he said. "And it's incredibly exacting and exposed and difficult to play. And everyone knows every note, so a performance has to be perfect."

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance arts writer and former music critic for the Tampa Tribune.