

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Florence Beatrice Smith Price

(April 9, 1887 – June 3, 1953)

"First Black Woman Recognized as a Symphonic Composer, and the First to have a Composition Played by a Major Orchestra"

Florence Beatrice Smith Price was born on April 9, 1887, in Little Rock, Arkansas; one of three children in a mixed-race family. Her mother, Florence Gulliver, was a music teacher and her father, James H. Smith, was a dentist. Florence played in her first piano performance at the age of four and had her first composition published by the age of eleven. She graduated from high school as Valedictorian at the age of 14. She enrolled into New England Conservatory and majored in piano and organ.

To avoid discrimination at the school, Florence pretended to be of Mexican decent. At the conservatory, she studied composition and counterpoint with notable composers, George Whitefield Chadwick and Frederick Shepherd Converse. There, she wrote her first string trio and symphony. She graduated with honors in 1906, with an artist diploma and a teaching certificate. She briefly taught music in Arkansas before moving to Atlanta. In 1910, Florence became the head of Clark Atlanta University's music department. In 1912, she married a prominent attorney, Thomas J. Price, and moved to Little Rock, Arkansas. Florence started a music school and continued to compose piano pieces, but she was denied membership in the Arkansas State Music Teachers Association because of her race. After a series of racial attacks and a much-publicized lynching, Florence and Thomas followed the "Great Migration" north, to Chicago. There Florence studied composition and orchestration with some historically notable composers and musicians. She was part of the Chicago Black Renaissance. She published four pieces in 1928.

Abuse and financial struggles led to divorce in 1931. Florence was 44 years

old. She worked as an organist for silent films and composed songs for radio ads under a pen name to support her two daughters. During this time, she lived with friends and eventually moved in with her student and friend, Margaret Bonds, also a black pianist and composer. Florence met writer Langston Hughes and Opera singer Marian Anderson during this time. Florence and Margaret Bonds performed together and achieved national recognition for their compositions and performances. In 1932, she submitted compositions for Wanamaker Foundation Awards. Florence won first place with her Symphony in E Minor and third place with her Piano Sonata. She came in first place with a song entitled "Sea Ghost." The Chicago Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Frederick Stock premiered in the

Symphony on June 15, 1933, making Price's piece the first composition by a black woman to be played by a major orchestra. In 1940, Price was inducted into the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers for her work as a composer. In 1949, Price published two of her spiritual arrangements, "I Am Bound for the Kingdom", and "I'm Workin' on My Buildin'". She dedicated them to Marian Anderson, who performed them on a regular basis. Under the name Vee Jay she also wrote a number of popular tunes such as "Songs to the Dark Virgin" and "Hold Fast to Dreams." Marian Anderson chose Price's arrangement of "My Soul's Been Anchored in de Lord" when she gave her historic concert at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939. In 1940 the WPA Symphony in Michigan performed her composition, Symphony No. 3 in C Minor.

On June 3, 1953, Florence Beatrice Smith Price died from a stroke in Chicago, Illinois, at the age of 66. In 1964, the Florence B. Price Elementary School opened in Chicago Public Schools in her honor. The school housed a piano owned by Florence until it closed in 2013. In 2019, the building became a church.



Florence Price with her daughter Florence Louise Robinson. (University of Arkansas Libraries)

