



Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

“...The work of a woman composer is preconceived by many to be light froth, lacking in depth, logic, and virility. Add...the incident of race—I have Colored blood in my veins—and you will understand some of the difficulties that confront one in such a position.”

From a Letter by Florence Price



Courtesy, Arkansas PBS

Silent No More: Rediscovering the Musical Genius of Florence Price

Note: Thank you, Chris R for suggesting this story!

Classical composer Florence Price [made history](#) in 1933 when she became the first African-American woman to have a symphony performed by a major American orchestra. Her [Symphony No. 1 in E Minor](#) debuted at the Chicago World’s Fair to a packed house of more than 4000 people. Price received multiple standing ovations and critical acclaim. *The Chicago Daily News* [reported](#) that the orchestra hadn’t seen such an overwhelming response in more than fifty years, and described the piece as “...a work that speaks its own message with restraint and...passion...worthy of a place in the regular symphonic repertory.”

Price was **born** Florence Beatrice Smith in 1887 to an upper middle-class family in Little Rock, Arkansas. Her father was a dentist and her mother was a classically trained singer and pianist who began instructing Price at an early age. At **four years old**, Price gave her first piano performance. At eleven, she published her first musical composition, and at age fourteen, Price graduated valedictorian from high school. Two years later she left for Boston to **attend** the prestigious New England Conservatory of Music, one of only a few schools to admit Black students. Price graduated in 1906 with degrees in both piano and organ.



As a young adult, courtesy, University of Arkansas

Price later became head of the music department at the all-Black Clark College in Atlanta. She returned to Little Rock after she married in 1912. She and her husband had three children, two of whom survived.

Throughout the 1910s and 20s, Southern states saw a dramatic increase in **racial violence** that included lynchings and an ever-tightening grip of Jim Crow segregation. This period also marked a **mass migration** of African-Americans to urban centers in the North. Among them, Price and her family moved to Chicago in 1927. This exodus from the South ignited a cultural explosion later known as the **Black Renaissance**.

Like Harlem in New York, Chicago boasted a mingling of artists, musicians, writers, and dancers. This free-flowing exchange of ideas and inspiration resulted in new forms of artistic expression that influenced Price's work.

According to retired professor and music critic **Barbara Wright-Pryor**, Price's compositions are firmly rooted in European classical tradition, but are also strongly influenced by African melodies and by Black American forms such as gospel, blues, and jazz.

Price also used her music to share the stories and history of her ancestors. She incorporated **African dances** including the **Juba** and the **Cakewalk**. A celebratory dance that traveled from West Africa to the Americas with enslaved people, the Juba involved foot stomping and the rhythmic tapping of arms and legs. The Cakewalk originated on plantations in the mid-19th century as a sort of game of musical chairs with the last person winning sweets.

In spite of the cultural flowering of Black heritage, African-American composers like Price were almost entirely excluded from classical venues because of predominantly white patrons and the established European canon of music. Black artists, including Price, often held day jobs and pursued music by working in churches as organists, pianists, and conductors. Others stayed within the racially accepted confines of jazz and blues clubs or they became teachers.

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Organ Composition by Florence Price, courtesy, University of Arkansas

Although Chicago was a creative mecca for Price, her marriage disintegrated soon after their arrival. In 1930, Price filed for [divorce](#) and won on grounds of “extreme and repeated cruelty.” She also received custody of her two daughters.

To support her children, Price [played](#) the organ to accompany silent films in movie theaters along “the stroll,” a stretch of State Street between 26th and 39th. She earned money playing at church services, teaching piano, and writing advertising jingles. She also continued to compose music and submit her work to competitions. Her break came in 1932 when *Symphony No. 1* [earned](#) a top prize by the Wanamaker Music Foundation. It caught the attention of Frederick Stock, conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, who premiered the piece the following year at the World’s Fair. Price was forty-six.



Florence Price, courtesy of University of Arkansas

In 1939, Price’s arrangement of *My Soul's Been Anchored in The Lord* was [performed](#) by contralto Marian Anderson at her [historic](#) concert at the Lincoln Monument in Washington, D.C. Price's music was also performed in concert halls in Detroit, Michigan, and Brooklyn.

Despite these successes, Price struggled. In [a letter](#) to the conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1943, she lamented, "I have two handicaps. I am a woman and I have some Negro blood in my veins."

Price remained in Chicago until her death in 1953. Although she had broken racial and gender biases throughout her life, her work was largely forgotten. Then, in 2009, a couple [purchased](#) Price’s former summer home. Located outside of Chicago, it had remained abandoned since her death. When renovations began, the buyers discovered more than thirty boxes containing Price’s handwritten music and notes.

It took experts more than a decade to sort and organize Price’s papers. Two scholars [Rae Linda Brown](#) and the late [Barbara Garvey](#), pieced them together into scores that could be played and recorded. In 2020, Brown published Price’s biography, *The Heart of a Woman*. In 2016, the Public Broadcasting System aired *The Caged Bird*, a documentary about her life. The title refers to a poem by Langston Hughes that Price set to music. Today, as more of Price’s music is being performed, her legacy continues to grow.

Although Price received little acclaim during her life, scholar [Lara Downes](#), noted: “...hearing her story today, it can be tempting to assume...that Florence Price’s career was not successful...it’s a mistake to think that because she wasn’t having her music played by every great American orchestra during her lifetime that she felt failure or... disappointment...She loved doing what she was doing. She never stopped, she never stopped writing music.”

[Listen](#) to some of Price’s work.

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Florence Price battled racism, sexism, domestic abuse, and job discrimination while pursuing her dreams.

Ask a friend: What does it take to keep going despite such struggle?

Ask yourself: How do we nurture those qualities in our children? Our grandchildren? Our friends?

Spreading the Word: Recent / Upcoming Keynotes & Talks

Thank you Sherry B. for hosting me and your dynamic and dedicated friends earlier this month! In November, I'll be speaking at the Salt Lake City **Town Club** and my schedule for **Women's History Month** in March 2023 is filling up. **In June**, I'm honored to be a panelist at the **2023 Berkshire Conference of Women Historians** in Santa Clara, California.

I appreciate the opportunity to share my passion-- Mary Ware Dennett and other remarkable women whose stories we should have learned in school--**the achievers, iconoclasts, catalysts and especially the troublemakers!** If you have a group you'd like me to address, contact me at: Sharon@SharonSpaulding.com.



[Sharon Spaulding](#) is a feminist historian and researcher specializing in the life and times of Mary Ware Dennett (1872-1947). The curator of Dennett's family archives, Sharon is writing a book about Dennett. In 2020, Time magazine included Dennett as one of the most important women in American history.

Sharon received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her work. Her journalism has appeared in [Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), [New Hampshire Magazine](#), [BOLD](#), and others. She lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and two dogs.

Sharon is available to speak about Dennett and the forgotten stories of other women, as well as the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century. Contact her at: Sharon@SharonSpaulding.com.

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