

KISHWAUKEE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

October 15, 2022

PROGRAM NOTES

by Geoffrey Decker

Ballade in A minor, Op. 33 by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912)

Born in London in 1875, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was son of a Black father from Sierra Leone and an English mother. In spite of his mixed-race heritage, success and popularity did not elude him. Audiences held both his music and his conducting in high regard and were watching his rise in fame with great interest at the time of his early death at age 37 in 1912.

Coleridge-Taylor studied violin at the Royal Academy of Music and eventually won a scholarship to study composition with Sir Charles Villiers Stanford (1852-1924). In 1903, he founded and led a very successful amateur string orchestra in Croydon. Later adding a professional group of winds to the orchestra allowed him to not only expand its repertoire but, more importantly, to showcase his own compositions for full orchestra.

His rise to prominence was what can only be described as meteoric. After his appointment to the Royal Academy of Music as a violin teacher in 1898, he joined the faculty of Trinity College in London as professor of composition in 1903. From 1904 to 1912, he held the position of conductor of the London Handel Society and later taught composition at the prestigious Guildhall School.

Coleridge-Taylor completed three very successful tours to the United States in 1904, 1906, and 1910, during which he conducted his own works and became known as the “African Mahler” among white musicians in New York. In a rare event for people of African descent, President Theodore Roosevelt received Coleridge-Taylor at the White House. The success of these tours, and the fact that he was intrigued by his father’s descendancy from African-American slaves freed by the British at the end of the American Revolution and relocated to Sierra Leone, led him to consider emigrating to the United States.

From the very beginning, Coleridge-Taylor’s works showed great individuality, which rapidly won them recognition from many, including Sir Edward Elgar (1857-1934). It was Elgar who put forth Coleridge-Taylor’s name to write a new work for the Three Choirs Festival of Britain. Beginning in April 1898, the work he composed was tonight’s piece, the Ballade in A minor, Op. 33. The work premiered with the composer conducting the Three Choirs Festival Orchestra on September 12, 1898, in Shire Hall in Gloucester.

The work is in a single highly dramatic and episodic movement lasting approximately 12 minutes. The beginning *Allegro energico* (fast with energy) is exactly that. The high energy gives way to a quiet interlude, with almost exclusively woodwinds and strings, that builds to a soaring romantic melody reminiscent of some of Coleridge-Taylor’s Irish contemporaries. The

main theme returns, it gives way again to the interludial music, and finally the main theme returns again to end the work in a flourish of power and excitement.

The Ballade in A minor, Op. 33, is scored for strings, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets in B-flat, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets in B-flat, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and percussion.

Concerto in D minor in One Movement for Piano and Orchestra

by Florence Price (1887-1953)

Putting on their work clothes that morning in 2009, anticipating a full day of emptying out the abandoned cottage north of town they had recently bought, Vicki and Darrell Gatwood of St. Anne, Illinois, had no idea that they would, that day, be making one of the most important discoveries in American musical history. After years of neglect, exposure to the elements, and vandalism, the cottage seemed almost unsalvageable; and the overgrown weeds and thick covering in vines told the Gatwoods they had their hands full. Fortunately, their determination to make it habitable again was undiminished.

As they worked through some of the cottage's few dry areas, they found personal papers, books, and sheets of handwritten music, the name Florence Price on much of it. History is fortunate here, though. They decided against shoveling up what most people in the same situation would ignore and throw into a trash bag, just moving on. Who was this Florence Price? Their curiosity piqued, they decided to find out.

After some quick Internet searches, they discovered she was a composer who had lived and worked in Chicago and who had died in 1953. And that she spent summers in St. Anne! They found a connection between her and the University of Arkansas, so they contacted archivists there who excitedly took the lead and traveled to view the papers. They quickly realized that dozens of Price's musical scores that had long been thought lost were among the papers. Several significant compositions found were works like her Violin Concertos Nos. 1 and 2 and her Fourth Symphony.

The first female African-American composer to have a symphony performed by a major American orchestra, the very gifted Florence Price enjoyed a national reputation during her lifetime. Born in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1887, she studied composition with both George Whitefield Chadwick (1854-1931) and Frederick Converse (1871-1940) at the prestigious New England Conservatory in Boston where she graduated in 1906. She published her first work at age 11 in 1899 and, in 1928, won a prize from the publishing house G. Schirmer in New York City for a solo piano work titled *At the Cotton Gin*.

In September 1932, Price's Symphony in E minor caught the attention of Chicago Symphony Orchestra conductor Frederick Stock. After it won the Rodman Wanamaker Contest for African-American composers, Stock premiered the work with the CSO on June 15, 1933, in a concert entitled "The Negro in Music" during Chicago's Century of Progress International Exposition. Although it made Florence Price the first African-American woman to have a work performed by

a major American orchestra, the performance stands in contrast to the fact that restaurants at the fair refused to serve African-American customers!

The second work performed tonight, Price's Concerto in D minor in One Movement for Piano and Orchestra, was commissioned by Stock and conducted by him at its premiere in Chicago in 1934 with the composer as soloist. Dedicated to a Mrs. Helen A. Andrews of Winnetka, Illinois, the concerto is similar to piano concertos by Mendelssohn and Liszt in that the work is played without break even though there are three distinct sections. The first begins with an introduction in slow tempo which is followed by an urgent and lyrical section. Lightly scored, the second section is tender and nostalgic, and the work ends with a happy folk dance known as a *juba* that was popular among slaves on plantations in the American South in the pre-Civil War era.

Price herself was soloist at the concerto's premiere in Chicago in 1934. After that, there is no evidence that the work was performed again, and the composer's manuscript of the orchestral score was lost. Composer Trevor Weston (b. 1967) of the Juilliard School was commissioned to reconstruct the concerto's orchestration so that it could be revived. The work lasts about 18 minutes and is scored for strings, flute, oboe, two clarinets in B-flat, bassoon, two horns in F, two trumpets in B-flat, two trombones, timpani, and percussion.

Symphony No. 3 in C minor by Florence Price

Florence Price's Symphony No. 3 in C minor is, like her others, traditional in form and stylistically conservative. She was heavily influenced in her style and sound by the American symphonic "sound" cultivated at the turn of the last century and beyond. Her teacher, the aforementioned George Whitefield Chadwick, was a member of the so-called Second New England School of composers that took strong interest in African-American folk music and rhythms.

Even though many attribute that American sound to Czech composer Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) who, when he left his teaching position in New York City in 1895, bequeathed it to his students as manifested in his Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95 "From the New World" of 1893, Florence Price, like others of her contemporaries, were influenced perhaps even more by Chadwick. It was he who used a Negro spiritual melody based on a pentatonic scale – a scale consisting of five notes instead of the usual eight as we are most familiar with – in one of his symphonies seven years before Dvořák's "New World Symphony".

Price's Third Symphony was commissioned by the Depression-Era's Works Progress Administration's Federal Music Project in 1938 and is in the traditional four-movement form. Like many symphonies by Haydn and Mozart, the third movement is dance-like; but, unlike those symphonies, Price once again uses the *juba*, a pre-Civil War slave dance, for her dance-like movement.

Conductor Valter Poole and the Detroit Civic Orchestra premiered the symphony at the Detroit Institute of Arts on November 6, 1940. The symphony was very well received, and J. D. Callaghan of the *Detroit Free Press* wrote, "Mrs. Price, both in the [piano] concerto and in the

symphony, spoke in the musical idiom of her own people, and spoke with authority. There was inherent in both works all the emotional warmth of the American Negro, so that the evening became one of profound melody satisfaction. In the symphony there was a slow movement of majestic beauty, a third in which the rhythmic preference of the Negro found scope in a series of dance forms, and a finale which swept forward with great vigor.”

The symphony lasts about 30 minutes and is scored for piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets in B-flat, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets in B-flat, three trombones, tuba, harp, timpani, percussion, celeste, and strings.

By the way, the Kishwaukee Symphony Orchestra has its own connection to Florence Price. Board of Directors member, and President of the Kishwaukee Symphony Associates, Gretchen Moore’s mother, Lelia Wright, was a violinist in the Woman’s Symphony Orchestra in Chicago in the 1930s and was fortunate to have the opportunity to play several of Florence Price’s works. So memorable were they that she proudly passed this information down to her daughter.

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