

FLORENCE PRICE (1887-1953)

Five Folksongs in Counterpoint (mvts. 3 & 4)

Composed: 1951

Approximate duration: 6 minutes



Florence Price, a native of Little Rock, Arkansas, was a pioneer black American composer who distinguished herself early on. Most notably, she is remembered as the first black American woman to garner success as a composer of symphonic music. Her first symphony is perhaps her best-known work. Winner of a national prize, it was given its première in 1933 by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra—a social and cultural milestone in this country at that time.

At a young age she journeyed north to Boston to study at the New England Conservatory and returned to Arkansas and Georgia to teach at various small black colleges. After marriage she and her husband left a racially troubled Arkansas in 1927 for Chicago and her further study at the American Conservatory of Music. Her career blossomed, and recognition for her art led to the afore-mentioned symphony in 1931, followed by two more symphonies, concertos, and other works for orchestra. She composed in a variety of other genres: chamber works, piano music, and vocal compositions—over three hundred in all! Her songs and arrangements of spirituals were perhaps her most performed compositions. But, sadly, little of her *œuvre* has been published; with her increasing popularity today, that very well may change.

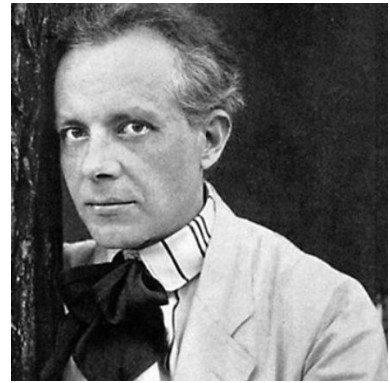
She apparently wrote two compositions for string quartet, both dated around 1950, although she may have begun one of them much earlier. They had similar titles—and underwent somewhat confusing title changes, as well—and both featured folksongs. Our concert features the quartet originally entitled “Negro Folksongs in Counterpoint;” after the addition of two broadly American folksongs to the original three, she changed the title to simply “Five Folksongs in Counterpoint.”

Thus, the five are: “Calvary,” “My Darling Clementine,” “Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes,” “Shortnin’ Bread,” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” These movements are manifestly not the usual simplistic arrangements of folksongs one often encounters. Anyone capable of the composition of sophisticated symphonies can and will do much more. Accordingly, they—notwithstanding the recognizable use of folk material—are miniature essays in contrapuntal treatment. One will hear a variety of accompanying motives and countermotives, usually in a non-imitative texture. Price was well educated in traditional European classical compositional styles and techniques, and her sophistication shows eloquently here. Yet, she is concomitantly, proudly and solidly rooted in her cultural roots. Recipient of early recognition, and then relative obscurity, her music is now enjoying a renaissance. --Wm. Runyan

BELA BARTÓK (1881-1945)

Composed: 1927

Approximate duration: 16 minutes



String Quartet No. 3, BB 93 Sz.85

I. Prima parte. Moderato

II. Seconda Parte. Allegro

III. Ricapitulazione della prima parte. Moderato

IV. Coda. Allegro molto

Béla Bartók's Third String Quartet was written in 1926, when the composer was in his mid-forties. At this point in his life, he was internationally recognized, not just as an important composer but also as one of the earliest serious ethnomusicologists: he collected and catalogued folk music from several Eastern European countries, and even ranged as far as North Africa in his research. To Bartók's thinking, folk music was of more than scientific interest; it was the life-giving seed without which there was no way forward in musical creation. One might contrast him with a late Romantic composer such as Brahms, for whom writing a Hungarian Rhapsody meant to flavor his essentially Brahmsian composition with a light perfume of Hungarian rhythms or harmonies, as a kind of exotic touch. Bartók aimed, on the other hand, to absorb completely the rhythms and contours of the folk melodies he collected, to a point where his own compositions were the natural result. Where for Brahms or Liszt the folk element would be the garnish on top, for Bartók it was the nucleus, the central thing around which he formed his own style and structure.

The Third Quartet is Bartók's shortest quartet. It is the only one written in one continuous movement, consisting of a First Part (slow music), a Second Part (quick), a Recapitulation of the First Part and a Coda. The First Part has the quality of an artist contemplating his materials, turning over in his hands this motif, that rhythm. In writing music of this kind, Bartók seems to hearken back to Beethoven in his late quartets, writing music whose "examined" quality seems to invite the listener into the composer's workshop to watch him at work — self-referential music, music about the (sometimes very difficult) creative act. Such music might run the risk of being overly abstruse, fragmentary, disorienting; but Bartók couches his exercise in such a dazzling array of textures, colors and intensities that the theory behind the writing is utterly transformed. Late in the First Part, after many halting forays, some brilliant, some desolate, some ghostly, the composer finally launches a sustained song in the second violin and viola, lyrical and warm, with gentle droning accompaniment from the outer voices — a first polished attempt out of the scraps and shreds of his laboratory.

Just as we are given this one moment of seeming completeness, the atmosphere dissolves in the space of a few short bars, and we are catapulted into the Second Part, which is in every way different: quick rather than measured, continuous rather than fragmented, moving along scales instead of leaps, confident and single-minded rather than halting and dilatory. The Second Part also sounds, at least on the surface, closer to folk roots, particularly in its rhythm and its evocation of a stamping dance. Starting teasingly with plucked chords in the cello and viola, the music slowly gathers strength, moving to a terse, dancing melody, passed among the instruments, then repeated

more forcefully, inverted, and finally exploding in the second main idea, strongly rhythmic, played fortissimo by the lower voices. These two melodies move through several transformations, with tempi that sometimes press forward, and sometimes fall back; at one point the first melody is transformed into a tense, pianissimo chase, a whispered fugue. Finally, the music reaches a peroration of sorts, punctuated by wailing slides, fragmenting gradually in the throes of its crisis.

This fragmentation portends the return of the First Part, ushered in by a short but intense cello passage. In this "Recapitulation", the slow First Part is transformed almost beyond recognition. The material is the same, but the energy and the pacing are quite different. Earlier, the music was contemplative but curious, filled with an energy to try moving in many possible directions. In this later incarnation, the energy is spent, desolate; appropriately for a recapitulation, the music seems to reminisce, to look brokenly backwards rather than forwards. Then, just when the point of utter stillness is upon us, we are swept by some invisible source of energy into the whirling, ghostly music of the Coda. This final, brief section is a return to the vitality of the Second Part, recapping its materials in a yet more intense and effervescent manner, punctuated by gruff refrains and seismic slides, and culminating in a final salvo of brusque unison gestures, an energetic affirmation of life.

Note by Misha Amory (Brentano String Quartet)

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)

Composed: 1825

Approximate duration: 34 minutes



Octet for Strings in Eb, Op.20

- I. Allegro moderato ma con fuoco
- II. Andante
- III. Scherzo: Allegro leggierissimo
- IV. Presto

Mendelssohn composed his glorious Octet for strings in 1825 when he was merely 16 years old. Today, it is regarded as a first-rate masterwork on par with those of the finest mature composers of any age granting Mendelssohn the reputation of the greatest prodigy in Western musical history. What is more, Mendelssohn had no specific models from distinguished predecessors as a basis: his Octet is the first of its kind and has arguably never been surpassed. Conrad Wilson summarizes, "Its youthful verve, brilliance and perfection make it one of the miracles of nineteenth-century music." Recent research by Nicolas Kitchen of the Borromeo Quartet reveals that a more mature

Mendelssohn somewhat substantially edited the score before its final publication in 1832. Mendelssohn dedicated the Octet to his violin teacher Eduard Rietz and the first violin part is virtuosic throughout.

The Octet is a full-scale four-movement work in the classical style. The opening movement is a sprawling sonata complete with contrasting themes, development, recapitulation, and coda, over twice as long as any of the subsequent movements. The second movement Andante is a poignant, melancholy slow movement exploiting a myriad of suave and ever changing textural possibilities. The third movement offers a stunning first example of Mendelssohn's distinctive scherzi featuring quicksilver agility with a soft dynamic evoking the time-honored suggestion of woodland fairies. As his sister Fanny would write, "The whole piece is to be played staccato and pianissimo with shivering tremolos and lightning flashes of trills. All is new, strange and yet so familiar and pleasing – one feels close to the world of spirits lightly carried up into the air." The finale launches into swift perpetual motion with an eight-part fugue working through the entire ensemble from bottom to top followed by a theme that reminds many listeners of Handel's Messiah. The entire Octet is a miracle of scoring using just about every imaginable permutation of voices provided by the eight string players. Such mastery derives from the numerous string symphonies Mendelssohn wrote between the ages of 12 and 14 with one particularly vivid precursor in the String Symphony No. 8 in D major.

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