

FLORENCE PRICE (1841-1904)

String Quartet No.2 in A minor

(for 2 violins, viola and cello)

- 11:50 I. Moderato
- 7:14 II. Andante cantabile
- 4:52 III. Juba. Allegro
- 5:57 IV. Finale. Allegro

Duration: 30 minutes (approximately)

Published: 1935 (age 47-48)



Florence B. Price was a brilliant student, graduating high school valedictorian in her native Little Rock, AR at the age of 14. She went on to study composition, organ performance, and piano pedagogy, receiving two diplomas from the New England Conservatory in Boston, before a brief run as the Head of Music at Clarke Atlanta University. After returning to Little Rock in 1912 at the age of 25 to give back to her community, Florence married Thomas Price and had three children. In 1927, under the specific threat of having her youngest daughter be the target of a planned retaliatory hate murder, the Price family was forced to flee. Florence's woes would not stop there. Once her whole family migrated to Chicago by 1928, the stock market crash of 1929 and the following Great Depression devastated her family life and finances. Her husband was in and out of jobs and was physically abusing her, escalating to the point of threatening her life with a gun. Florence was able to serve him a divorce summons in 1930 with the backing of multiple witnesses and gained full custody of her children by 1931. During these years, Florence's artistic output flourished out of need, and she made money teaching music, accompanying the silent films in Chicago's "Stroll" district, and composing pedagogical piano pieces for children which were commercially viable enough to be published. During this time, she even penned popular songs under the alias "VeeJay."

Despite her circumstances, Florence thrived in her early years in Chicago, studying orchestration at the American Conservatory and winning prizes in the Wanamaker Competition that would lead to her Symphony in E minor being discovered and premiered by the Chicago Symphony, a milestone for a woman composer as well as for a composer of color. The resulting fame and opportunity in and around Chicago would be the impetus for a crescendo of artistic output over the next two decades, although Florence would pass away just before leaving on her first tour of Europe, missing out on a rite of passage that would grant her contemporaries such as William Grant Still, acceptance in the classical pantheons of Boston, Philadelphia, and New York; and the acceptance that Florence strived for but would elude her in her lifetime. Despite wanting to be a champion of American new music, Boston Symphony conductor Serge Koussevitzky would deny Florence Price's appeals to have her scores judged only on their merits, over the course of four letters to him from 1941 to 1944. Price's inclusion in the canon is surely long overdue, and still to this day, many judge Price's works with bias or ignorance. The 2021 release of Price's Symphonies No. 1 and 3 by the Philadelphia Orchestra was revelatory and a good faith effort to remedy this past injustice, however

many other major orchestras have yet to program Price's symphonic music even once. Antonin Dvořák, who passed away before ever getting to know Florence Price's music, championed the idea that a noble school of American composition would come from the folk music of Negro Spirituals. Many white American composers took up Dvořák's call and the resulting music, perhaps due to its inauthenticity, didn't carry the gravitas or nobility that Dvořák foresaw.

It is of interest to note her use of the Juba Dance as a form for all of their third movements. In her own words, "In all of my works which have been done in the sonata form with Negroid idiom, I have incorporated a juba as one of the several movements because it seems to me to be no more impossible to conceive of Negroid music devoid of the spiritualistic theme on the one hand than strongly syncopated rhythms of the juba on the other." In the late 1940's, Florence, at this point in her 60's, penned two separate string quartets entirely based on contrapuntal re-imaginings of traditional folk songs.

Florence Price's String Quartet in A minor (titled No. 2 by Schirmer) is the largest scale work of Price's chamber music that has not been lost. Dated 1935 on the manuscript, the quartet shares very similar formal features and idioms as the Piano Quintet in A minor and the Symphonies 1 and 3. The quartet is densely and virtuosically written with an abundance of double stops, fast arpeggiated flourishes, and brooding contrapuntalism. Each movement is like an entire world unto its own: a highly romantic and searching first movement, a profound spiritual-esque second movement, a boisterous juba third movement, and a blistering finale movement. It is truly a treasure to have such a monumental work for string quartet that captures so richly and dynamically the depth of Price's unique Afro-romantic genius.

- Paul Laraia (violinist, Catalyst Quartet)

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

String Quintet No. 2 in G major, Op. 111

(for 2 violins, 2 violas and cello)

11:41 I. Allegro non troppo, ma con brio

6:33 II. Adagio

5:46 III. Un poco allegretto

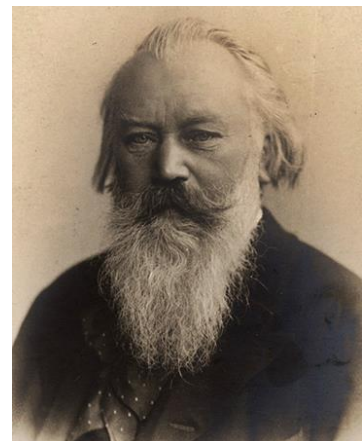
5:23 IV. Vivace ma non troppo presto

Duration: **31 minutes** (approximately)

Composed: **1890** (age 56-57)

Premiere: November 11, 1890. Vienna

Published: 1891, Berlin: N. Simrock (age 57-58)



At the age of 57, Brahms sent this quintet in to his publisher, Fritz Simrock, with a note announcing his retirement. “It really is time to stop”, he wrote. This was of course before he had heard Meiningen court clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld, who inspired him to come out of retirement to write works for the clarinet.

It is obvious, though, that with this G major string quintet he planned to go out with an impressive work, and truly impressive it is. The sound, for one thing, is luminous and luxuriantly full. Having five string players at his disposal, Brahms had no compunction about enlarging the sound even further by the frequent use of double stops. The scoring used by Mozart for his string quintets—with an extra viola instead of the extra cello favored by Schubert—allowed for a richer mid-range, which he exploits to the fullest. The first movement’s second theme, for example, is introduced by a brace of violas.

Composed while Brahms was vacationing in the Austrian Alps in the summer of 1890, the work sends fresh mountain air up the nostrils of its listeners and evokes the vast panoramic landscapes that its composer must have seen when composing it. Nothing offers better evidence of this than its astonishing opening, with the cello holding forth against the rest of the ensemble’s quavering soundscape to spin out a fresh-as-spring melody of wide harmonic range and swaggering rhythmic vigor. In the first of the many dance forms that interlard this work, its second subject is a double dollop of Viennese waltz played by the violas. The development is strikingly symphonic in scope, with numerous contrasting sections to occupy the ear until the opening theme returns, in the first violin for the recapitulation, which takes the previous thematic material to new heights of expressiveness in the high register.

The second movement is monothematic, without contrasting sections. Its simple melody, embellished by a turn, is presented in four variations that range from the serene to the passionately declamatory. This movement is marked with unusual harmonic interest and is distinctly darker in tone color than the first because of the prominent role given to the viola, which presents the theme at the opening and introduces its final statement with a small cadenza near the end.

The third movement is one of those wistful pieces, paced neither slow nor fast, that capture something unique in the Brahmsian musical aesthetic: that restrained middle ground between restrained sentiment and outright sentimentality best described as *intermezzo*. An utterly charming Trio in the major mode features dueling pairs of violins and violas that return for a final bow at the end of the movement.

The finale is a romping sonata-rondo richly imbued with dance rhythms. The principal theme, based on a mischievous snippet of four 16th notes, is given a jaunty accompaniment with many an off-beat accent. The second theme, in triplets, has its own type of swagger strongly suggestive of country folk dance. Neither, however, can match the high-kicking *élan* of the coda, reminiscent of the Hungarian *czárdás*.

- Notes by Donald G. Gíslason, Ph.D